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THE

SILVER CORD.

THE SILVER CORD:

A Story.

BY

SHIRLEY BROOKS,

AUTHOR OF "ASPEN COURT," "THE GORDIAN KNOT," ETC.

"A swarm of fire-flies, tangled in a silver braid."

TENNYSON.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE SILVER CORD.

CHAPTER I.

THAT morning Arthur Lygon and Charles Hawkesley arrived in Paris, and it will easily be imagined that during their journey they had fully discussed the various courses that were open to them. But they addressed themselves to the painful subject in very different moods of mind. Lygon permitted himself to be almost passive, when contemplating his own future, a future which he had brought himself to believe was doomed to be one of bereavement and wretchedness. He was unable to disentangle the complications which the arrival of Bertha, and her miserable revelations, had introduced into the story; but he was not to be shaken in his conviction that the fatal letter from Urquhart had been based upon discoveries which no addition of circumstances could render less damning. Hawkesley, on the contrary, had been unable to resist the influence of his wife's earnest and affectionate pleading for faith in her sister Laura, of her womanly intenseness of belief that the latter was the martyr to some strange and wicked perversion

of facts, and he prepared to apply himself to a task which he refused to look upon as a melancholy one, so far as Lygon and Laura were involved. But there was enough, more than enough, in the thought of the approaching meeting with Robert Urquhart, to deprive Hawkesley of the power of exerting himself to inspire his companion with the hopeful view which the author had adopted as to the position of Laura.

The interview with Bertha had been brief and sad. Beatrice had resolved that it should take place, and that Arthur should learn from Mrs. Urquhart's own lips that, let his wife's conduct have been what it might, her flight to Versailles had been caused by her resolution to save a guilty sister. Bertha would scarcely speak, but with sobs and murmured assent she confirmed the tale as she had told it to Mrs. Hawkesley. Arthur Lygon questioned her but slightly. He believed her to be utterly regardless of truth, utterly lost to honour; and though he had no hesitation in accepting her statement as against herself, he gave no credence to her faint protests that he was wronging Laura. He went through the scene rather as a form, than as a means of obtaining information, and when it was over, he quietly said,

"The sooner we are in Paris the better."

And the sisters were left to themselves, and it was perhaps well that the increasing illness of Mrs. Urquhart compelled her removal to the seclusion of the sick room, and her being treated with the for-

bearance which her condition required. For Beatrice, though she might almost have striven to seek merciful extenuation for the sin of the weak and foolish Bertha, could but regard her selfishness and ingratitude with a severity that would, but for the prostration of Mrs. Urquhart, have found bitterer expression than had ever come from the loving and kindly Beatrice Hawkesley. But, enforced to silence on the theme nearest her heart, Mrs. Hawkesley tended her sister with a calm watchfulness that had more of duty than of affection.

The travellers drove to their hotel, and Lygon at once proposed that they should proceed to Versailles. But Hawkesley thought that it might be more acceptable to Robert Urquhart to be informed of their arrival, and to be summoned to Paris; and Lygon yielded with but little opposition. A messenger was therefore dispatched to Mr. Urquhart, with a few lines from Charles Hawkesley.

Leaving Arthur at the hotel, Hawkesley went in quest of Mr. Aventayle, and found the manager at his own quarters, waiting the hour for keeping his appointment with Adair.

"I call this mean, you know," said Aventayle, shaking his friend heartily by the hand—"you have no business here. Why is not my play finished off? Or have you come to annex—that's the word, isn't it—some incident from somebody else's piece?"

"My dear fellow, I am here on a very different matter."

"And a disagreeable one, I am afraid, by your manner, Charles," said Aventayle, looking sincerely concerned. "I could not know that, of course, or I shouldn't have met you with a joke."

"A painful business, Aventayle; but I do not want to speak of that at present."

"Can I be of any possible use?"

"I am not sure that I may not avail myself of your kindness. But let me ask you a question. Have you seen the man whose address you sent for?"

"Not yet, but I shall see him in less than an hour." And he informed his friend of the interview with the Pole, and of his own carelessness in forgetting the injunction not to apprise Adair of the expected arrival of Hawkesley.

"I wish it had been otherwise," said Hawkesley, "but we must manage as best we may."

"Do I understand that you know something of the man?"

"A great deal too much."

"Is he a bad lot, then?" asked Aventayle, curiously. "He is a very smart fellow, nevertheless."

"He is simply the greatest scoundrel in Paris," replied the author, "and that is saying a good deal."

"Well, it is, if half what one hears is true. I am sorry I am going to have anything to do with

him. But his being all that does not damage his piece, about which I am to call on him presently."

"Why does he not come to you?"

"I invited him, but he sends word that he is ill."

"Ill, is he?" repeated Hawkesley.

"So he says. Do you think it is a trap to inveigle me into some den of robbery?" asked Aventayle, smiling. "He won't get much out of an unlucky manager."

"No, I don't think it is," replied the other, so gravely that Aventayle could not help looking thoroughly puzzled. Without immediate answer, he took out Adair's address, and showed it to Hawkesley.

"That can hardly be a den of iniquity, close to the Rue de la Paix," said Aventayle.

Charles Hawkesley looked at the paper for a few moments, and said:

"One reads a distant address half-a-dozen times without associating any recollection with it, and then when one comes near the place a whole story revives. I know something about that house, or, at least, about the street. I heard about it from a man in the French embassy."

"I don't associate with such swells, you see."

"I'll tell you what, Aventayle," said Hawkesley, after some thought. "Stay, I must ask you a favour."

"I'm very glad you must. What can I do?"

"Break this appointment, and come with me."

"Well, but suppose I lose my piece."

"My dear Aventayle, when you know what I can tell you, and what I am afraid I shall be obliged to tell, you will as much think of connecting yourself in business with this man as with that chiffonnier there in that gutter. But take my word for the moment, will you?"

"Sir, I will take it in a greater matter. But had I not better send to him?"

"By-and-by, perhaps. Come along."

Charles Hawkesley had remembered his French friend's conversation to some purpose, and the use of that gentleman's name speedily procured for himself and Aventayle admission to the presence of an official of whom we have heard before. This was M. ——, the accomplished chief of the "system;" the personage on whom had devolved the duty of imparting to the unfortunate Robert Urquhart the news which sundered him for ever from the wife of his heart.

M. —— received the Englishmen with his usual urbanity, and the name of the *attaché*, though the chief admitted their acquaintance was of the slightest, proved a perfectly sufficient introduction. In what way could M. —— be of service?

Hawkesley explained that there was a person in Paris, regarding whom some exact information would be materially to the advantage of several persons, whose respectability would satisfy M. —— that he should be acting justifiably in serving them. He

would offer M. —— any explanation, and would venture to solicit his good offices.

M. —— would require no explanation from a gentleman who had been so introduced to him, unless it were necessary for the furtherance of Mr. Hawkesley's own objects. Who was the person?

Not a symptom of surprise came upon the well-tutored features of the official, when Hawkesley named Ernest Adair.

"M. Adair is fortunate enough to be the object of solicitude to more than one worthy person, just now," he answered quietly. "Shall I ask—but do not reply if the affair be a secret—whether your investigations connect themselves with a somewhat delicate matter in which an English, or rather a Scottish, family has lately been interested?"

"I perceive that the whole story is in your possession, M. ——," said Hawkesley. "I am the brother-in-law of Mr. Urquhart, of Versailles."

"Late of Versailles, would be the more accurate description."

"What!" exclaimed Hawkesley, alarmed. "You do not mean anything has happened—"

"Nothing to distress you—I regret I spoke unguardedly. I meant to imply that Mr. Urquhart has broken up his household, and abandoned Versailles, a fact to be deplored by all who know him."

"I have just sent off a messenger to his house."

"He will find it closed."

"But is he in Paris, M. ——? It is of the utmost importance that I should see him."

"I can obtain that information for you, and will do so with a sincere regret, for I shall be hastening an interview which I may, without indiscretion, suppose will be painful. I will send you word to your hotel. But as regards M. Adair, your relative has not much, I imagine, to learn."

"We have reason to think there are circumstances which we should know, and do not. M. Adair is in Paris."

"That is so," said the chief, with a very slight smile at the information.

"And he has given this as his address," continued Hawkesley, showing it to M. ——.

"He will be found there, I believe."

"He will be looked for there, at all events," said Charles Hawkesley. "But may I ask you in what position in society he is living?"

"M. Adair has no position in society, Mr. Hawkesley, and is an inferior agent of the law. The house to which he seems to have invited you is appropriated to the purposes of our police. Your companion appears to be surprised. Has such a character as M. Adair never been presented on the stage which Mr. Aventayle ornaments?"

"You know me, sir?" asked the manager, again looking astonishment.

"Who that has had the good fortune to see Mr. Aventayle upon the boards is likely to forget him?" replied M. ——. "Besides, he has frequently favoured Paris with visits."

"And this Adair *is* a bad fellow," said the straightforward Aventayle, bluntly.

"I do not know that it is for me to discredit him," said the chief, smiling goodnaturedly; "but I have owed Mr. Aventayle too much gratification not to be frank with *him*. M. Adair is a very finished scoundrel, and the less an honest man has to do with him the better for the honest man."

"That is what *you* said," remarked Aventayle to his friend. "There is an end of the matter as regards me. But," he added, perceiving that he was likely to hear what Hawkesley might not have intended should reach him, "I think that your conversation, gentlemen, had better be finished without me. You will find me at the hotel, Mr. Hawkesley."

He was about to bow and retire, when M. —— said,

"In the next room, Mr. Aventayle, you will find the journals. I would suggest your remaining."

When the manager had gone out, M. ——, drawing his chair somewhat nearer to Hawkesley, said,

"There is no object in keeping his appointment with Adair. Your friend will have nothing to say to him. You, on the contrary, will probably have a good deal."

"You knew of the appointment. True, I forgot. You know everything."

"Indeed, no; I wish we knew a quarter of every-

thing. But as for this Adair, you may suppose that I should not trouble myself about the movements of such a person except when on business. I happened to be aware that he was to meet your friend, merely because another person, who made the appointment, was wanted here, and had to excuse his absence. That is not worth a word. But, Mr. Hawkesley, I can probably be of more use to you, than in telling you so very little more than you already know. May I ask the object of your visit to France?"

"To see my brother-in-law."

"And your other brother-in-law, why does he accompany you? You arrived together at nine this morning."

Charles Hawkesley hesitated for a few moments, and the thought came to him that let the truth be what it might, it was probably known to M. ——, and that it might suit him to impart it. At all events, no possible injury could be done by accepting any aid that M. —— was pleased to afford.

"You are acquainted, M. ——, with the painful circumstances which have caused poor Urquhart to abandon his home."

"Unhappily, yes. But it is not to those circumstances that I owe the honour of making Mr. Hawkesley's acquaintance. I tell you frankly that I know this. Not of course that I would desire to ask a confidence that is not volunteered, but because for a reason which I am not at liberty to

mention, I would gladly make myself useful to any part of the family of Mr. Urquhart."

"You speak in a manner that leaves me in no doubt as to the sincerity of your intentions, M. ——, and I thank you on behalf of two persons who are suffering most undeservedly."

"One is suffering undeservedly, the other is not. The first is Mr. Urquhart, the second is Mr. Lygon."

"Lygon has deserved his misfortune!" exclaimed Hawkesley.

"I cannot now explain myself," replied M. ——. "It is more to the purpose to go on from your admission that Mr. Lygon's misfortune has brought you here. Now, I presume that you, Mr. Hawkesley, have too much wisdom to be party to the absurd scheme of vengeance which is at present occupying the mind of that very talented man, Mr. Urquhart."

"Of vengeance?"

"Yes. I perceive you know nothing of it, and I am sure you would discourage it if you could. It is true, however, that he has resolved to discover this unhappy Adair, and if he should succeed, a very terrible, and also a very ridiculous thing will be done."

"Urquhart will kill him."

"He will not, because, of course, means will be taken to prevent such a possibility," said M. ——.

"I am saying nothing offensive in supposing you will protect this Adair, on account of his employment in the police."

"I should certainly not do so on that account, but on his own. If the question simply turned upon the merits of this Adair, Mr. Urquhart should be at perfect liberty to throw him from one of the bridges into the Seine, either strangling him previously, or omitting that ceremony, as might best please him."

M. —— uttered these savage words in the gentlest tone imaginable, but perceiving that his manner did not seem to produce a favourable impression on Hawkesley, he added:

"I mean that I would not stretch out a hand to save Adair, who is a cold-blooded villain. But Mr. Urquhart shall never have a chance of touching him, because I honour and respect Mr. Urquhart."

"Yet, if I had met Urquhart, and had told him Adair's address, he would at once have gone there and carried out his revenge."

"Dear Mr. Hawkesley, think better of our sagacity. It is far from certain that had your friend Aventayle gone to the appointment he would have seen the man with whom he believed he was conversing, and quite certain that he would not, had he been accompanied by yourself. I have told you that the house is a police establishment."

"Well, M. ——, I gather that you mean kindly by my poor brother-in-law."

"Yes, whether you mean Urquhart or Lygon. Let us speak of the affairs of the latter, if you will. For, as regards the former, I fear the account is

made up. His fugitive wife is safe in one of the bedrooms of your hospitable house—why do you start?"

"Did I start? It was an involuntary homage to your system."

"We do our best," said M. ——, calmly, "but nothing is perfect. I was about to add that Mrs. Urquhart being safe in England, and her husband being solely bent upon his errand of impossible vengeance, we may leave their fortunes for the moment. Is Mr. Lygon come to reclaim his wife, and reconduct her to England?"

"You ask a question that it is impossible for me to answer."

"And, I presume, equally impossible for him?"

"At this moment, yes."

"In other words, Mr. Lygon has the misfortune to believe that he is as unhappy as Mr. Urquhart?"

"The misfortune to believe," repeated Hawkesley. "I snatch at your words, M. ——, because if you comprehend the distress which has been brought upon us all—"

"It has been made painfully clear to me in one case, Mr. Hawkesley, and I can easily imagine it in another, especially as in this last there was far more reason for a husband's grief than in the instance of poor Mr. Urquhart. I am speaking to a connection of the lady who bears his name, or I might use plainer language. It is right, however, you should know, that though the immediate purpose of Mrs.

Lygon's journey to France might have been answered, her hope to rescue another person from a degrading intrigue would have proved fruitless."

"I have been, unhappily, prepared to believe that," said Hawkesley. "But if you can give us any clue, any guide—"

"To Mrs. Lygon. I can give you her address at Versailles, and I know that she will be found there," said the Frenchman, looking straight into the face of his companion. "I understand," he added, after a pause, "it is not her whom you seek, but her reputation."

"No," said Hawkesley, with energy. "It is not so. Circumstances, as I see you are fully aware, have caused painful feelings to arise among us, and much unhappiness now exists. But no suspicion, M. ——, rests upon the character of Mrs. Lygon, and my errand to France is to obtain the explanations which must restore all to its old and happy condition. If you can assist me in this, you will, I am induced to hope, give me all the assistance in your power."

"I have told you that I will do anything to serve the family of Mr. Urquhart. But you must begin with frankness. You have just described to me a state of belief which does not exist."

"I do not understand."

"You have stated, perhaps with a pardonable exaggeration, your own convictions as to the lady of whom you speak. But you have entirely misrepresented those of her husband, who, if the information

I have received be true, either listened in sullen silence, or answered with strong doubts to the assurances and consolations with which you assailed him during your journey."

"During the journey?"

"Yes. Specially while the train was stationary, by an accident, near St. Just. When you consult a physician, Mr. Hawkesley, you tell him all your symptoms, or else you are not thought to be among the wise."

"Is it wonderful, M. ——," said Hawkesley, who had, by this time, become careless as to the means that gave his companion information, "is it wonderful that a husband whose affliction has made him less capable of judgment, should not be so easily convinced as another and a calmer person?"

"Leave the case so," said M. ——. "Mr. Lygon has yet to be convinced that he has an innocent wife. And you, Mr. Hawkesley, will spare no pains to lead him to that conviction."

"None. For it is mine."

"You have a difficult task before you, and you are about to place one and the greatest difficulty in your own way. Yes. You are about to bring together Mr. Lygon and the man whose own belief is directly the reverse of your own, and who has far more influence with Mr. Lygon than yourself."

"You mean Urquhart."

"Certainly. He is at once the witness and the judge in the case of the poor lady, as regards the evidence that comes against her from Versailles."

"Yes. And confident as I am that he has been deceived, I am as confident, M. ——, that Urquhart, a just and honourable man, will be brought to comprehend that deception, and to do right to the woman whom he has wronged."

"And what is your plan for unmasking this supposed deception."

"How can I say, until I have seen him—have heard his own evidence from beginning to end—have examined for myself into the value of the testimony."

"Suppose that all done, and you still retain your present belief in defiance of a mystery you cannot solve."

"Then," said Hawkesley, "may I not count upon your aid?"

"You may. But would it not be wiser to ask for that aid in the first instance?"

Hawkesley did not reply for a moment.

"I see," said M. ——. "Do not be vexed with yourself for betraying yourself. Most persons who enter this room betray themselves over and over again. You have the English feeling that you would rather work out this problem for yourself than be indebted to the means which I can place at your disposal. You have some romantic feeling that there is a contamination in the system which accomplishes its purpose in the most direct manner, and you prefer to try to organise a spy system of your own, which can only succeed by imitating us in a bungling fashion. Do not suppose I am

annoyed; I merely regret my desire to serve you must remain ungratified until you have ascertained that you can do nothing for yourselves. I shall equally be at your command when the time comes."

"I am not in a position to act on my own sole responsibility, M. ——, or I should at once admit the force of your representations. But, as will occur to yourself, Mr. Lygon, who has accompanied me to Paris, has the first claim to decide by what means he will obtain the satisfaction so earnestly desired."

"And you think that he will refuse to owe the solution of his doubts to the services of the police?"

"He is English enough—the word is your own, sir—to prefer another course, but I feel that no scruple ought finally to oppose itself to the ascertaining the facts, if we cannot arrive at them in our own way."

"Well, I recognise the sentiment. You propose at once to meet Mr. Urquhart?"

"Certainly."

The chief pressed a knob in the wall, and a distant single stroke on a bell was heard. He then wrote a few words on a slip of paper, and inserted it in a slit in the wall. A slight sound as of machinery was heard, and M. —— turned to Hawkesley.

"That is nothing mysterious—it is simply an ascending box, which saves a clerk's legs and my

tongue. Shall I tell you whence I took the idea of its construction? It is from a place which I dare say you never saw—the interior of a pawnbroker's shop in London."

"Might one ask what took you into such a place?" said Hawkesley.

"I served, or at least I stood behind the counter of a pawnbroker for two months, some years back, in order to be able to identify two fugitives—or as you politely call them refugees,—who were in the habit of raising money there. I was a young man then and rather enjoyed the adventure, which, moreover, gave me some curious insight into English life—not the life of the poor, Mr. Hawkesley—the *canaille* is alike everywhere — but into that of some much better people. I have seen some odd things."

"Let us hope that you will keep the secrets of that confessional."

"Some of them are useful to me, occasionally," said M. ——, carelessly. A bell near him, but behind the panel of the wall, sounded, and he lifted a small flap that fitted flush with the wood-work. A note lay in a black tray behind.

"Mr. Urquhart," said M. ——, when he had read the note, "was occupied yesterday in walking about the Bois de Boulogne. He took refreshment twice — the places are mentioned, but have no interest for you,— and he slept at the house of the mechanic, * * * * *, whom he has often employed in experiments. We have not yet the report of

his proceedings to-day, but I will send you word where he is to be found. You are at the Hotel Mirabeau?"

"Yes."

"But it occurs to me that the better plan will be for me to let Mr. Urquhart be informed of your arrival, and then it will be for him to visit you."

"That will, I am sure, be the promptest way," replied Hawkesley.

"It shall be done. Let me add one thing. It was in the chair in which you are now sitting that your unfortunate friend received the information which is now disturbing his mind, and driving him in this unhappy condition about Paris. He came to me on an errand similar to your own. I wish that the most distressing incident of my life could have been spared me, but I had no choice."

"Then—then," said Hawkesley, "do I understand you, M. ——, that the scoundrel who has been the cause of what is now afflicting us was so unspeakably base as to be the betrayer?"

"It was by some letters addressed to M. Ernest Adair," said M. ——, "that the fatal fact was proved to M. Urquhart."

"And by —," said the Englishman in ungovernable indignation, "if Urquhart should meet this unredeemable miscreant, it is not I, M. ——, who will stretch out my hand to prevent murder."

"The more needful, Mr. Hawkesley, that I

should stretch out mine. I must in justice to Mr. Urquhart prevent any such madness. Adair shall be kept out of the way of all of you. Shall I call in Mr. Aventayle ? "

CHAPTER II.

A QUARTER of an hour before the time at which Mr. Aventayle had agreed to visit Ernest Adair, the latter was once more summoned by his chief, M. Wolowski. The latter was alone in the small, mean room in the little street turning from the Rue de la Paix.

"You did not think proper to stay in the house, Adair," said the Pole, coldly.

"I did not," said Adair, seating himself. "You will admit that I was fully justified in taking every precaution in my power. I am perfectly aware, M. Wolowski, that this is a most important moment in my life, and that if I lose the game to-day, I lose your friendship."

"You have had no reason to say so."

"Pardon. At the risk of offending you, I must say that you have permitted yourself to import private regard into questions of business, and that your favouritism for another person is inducing you to do me wrong."

"The truth never offends me. The concealment of truth does not offend me, but it is a departure from the usages of the system."

"I am unconscious of having deserved that

remark. But once more, M. Wolowski, I claim justice at your hands."

"You shall have more than justice, Adair, if only to prove to you that you judge me unfairly. Chantal has been a better agent than yourself, yet I will show him so little favour on this occasion as to give you the opportunity of withdrawing your challenge."

"I will not do so, M. Wolowski."

"Is that final resolution the result of information which you have obtained since you left this room?"

"I made the resolution before leaving."

"Scarcely an answer. What was Mr. Aventayle's reply to this note?"

And M. Wolowski, smiling, held up, and threw to Adair a short note in the handwriting of the latter, and addressed to Mr. Aventayle.

Adair, accustomed as he was to the almost preternatural promptness and success of the system in which he was an adept, started, and an exclamation escaped him.

"You fill me with genuine admiration, M. Wolowski," he said. "That note has certainly not been written half an hour, and it is in your possession."

"Reserve your admiration, my dear Adair, for something worthy of it. A child—or, at least, a girl who had had a clandestine love-business—must have known that you would utilise that hour in ascertaining whether Mr. Aventayle had bruoght

your play to Paris with him. My messenger was at the Hotel Bedford before your own."

"He said that Aventayle was alone in the room."

"He spoke the truth—remember it, in case you have to employ him again. But while the Englishman was writing the hurried answer, a gentleman came in, and, with apologies, took a pen from the inkstand. Did your messenger not say that?"

"No."

"Then do not employ him again. If he had done his duty he would have told you that, even if he had not noticed that, by a curious awkwardness, the gentleman managed to push your note off the table. You have it, you see. What was the answer?"

"I presume you know that also."

"Frankly, no, for Aventayle did not use blotting paper. The abominable pounce-box stood before him, an old-fashioned invention, Adair, which we ought to discourage."

"Then here is the answer."

He produced in his turn a note from Aventayle. It was this:—

"DEAR SIR,

"Unfortunately, no. I came away without the play.

"Yours faithfully

"F. AVENTAYLE.

"E. ADAIR, ESQ."

M. Wolowski read the note.

"After this, you are doubly resolved that Chantal shall meet this manager."

"It will be very satisfactory that he should do so," said Adair quietly.

"Yes. If he could have looked over the manager's shoulder, and picked up the story as he went along, he might have succeeded in deceiving me as to his previous knowledge of the facts you have worked in."

"M. Chantal is a clever man."

"I like your just admission of the fact. Now, in return, I once more advise you to withdraw the challenge. Because, if Chantal acquits himself satisfactorily, your defeat is an accomplished fact."

"Allow me to persist," said Adair.

"This confirms what I always heard of your play, Adair. You were most obstinate when you held a weak hand."

"Let me play my cards out this time, however."

"I like you so well that I will not have you overtrumped. Your antagonist shall lay out his hand before you.—M. Chantal," he called, through a voice-pipe in the wall."

M. Chantal appeared.

"You have not been out, Chantal?"

"You desired me to remain."

"Very true. M. Adair has been more active, and has ascertained from Mr. Aventayle that he has not brought the play to Paris with him."

"I compliment M. Adair's activity."

"But how have you been employing your time, Chantal?"

"In admiring M. Adair's intellect."

"You are very good," said Adair, with a not very easy smile, for the tone of the young man was not pleasant.

"Explain, Chantal," said the chief.

"I have been perusing M. Adair's delightful play," said Chantal, pleasantly. "Let me return him the manuscript, with many thanks for the gratification."

Ernest Adair sprang to his feet with an oath, as Chantal ceremoniously laid a roll of paper into his hand.

It was the original rough manuscript of the play that he had sent to Aventayle.

"What is trumps, Adair?" said Wolowski, smiling.

"Robbery," exclaimed the enraged Adair. And clenching his fist, it seemed that he would have struck at Chantal, but that the Pole advanced upon Adair, and laid a hand on his arm.

"Come, come, my friend, we all labour for the common good. I thought your friend the Jesuit would have taught you that if an order is to exist, its members must have no personal views. Thank Chantal for his generous frankness, and prepare yourself to meet Aventayle."

CHAPTER III.

"WELL," said Mr. Aventayle to himself, as, after the interview at the bureau, he parted from his friend Hawkesley, with the arrangement that they were to meet late in the day. "Here is another piece of my luck. I come to Paris in the hope of doing a bit of business, and the very man who made it necessary for me to come over, steps in and proves to me that I must give up my design. Such is life, as hath been remarked once or twice before. I shall take back nothing with me, except the hotel bill, and that trick of the woman-furniture. However, that's something, and on the strength of that we'll have an ice."

He turned upon one of the Boulevards, installed himself at a table in the front of a restaurant; and, after the fashion of his country, procured a second chair for his feet, and ordered his refreshment.

"Monsieur forgets his appointment, or does not care to keep it," said a voice at his elbow.

The Pole quietly slid into a chair by the manager's side.

"Eh, ah!" said Aventayle. "Yes, you."

The monosyllables might not have seemed to the listener particularly expressive, but he perfectly understood them.

"Why, you see," said Aventayle, the next moment, "I could do no good unless I had your friend's play with me, and I have unluckily left it behind me."

"Shall you telegraph for it, Monsieur?"

"Telegraph for it—not a bad notion at all. Yes, to be sure, I can do that, and then I can make another appointment with you. Confound it!" said Aventayle to himself, "what am I to say to the fellow? I can't tell him that his friend is a rascal, and that I want no further dealings with him."

"Then I would suggest," said the Pole, "that the meeting take place at the bureau of M. ——."

"Now, what does he mean by that?" thought Aventayle. "However, he has no right to talk to me. I dare say," he said, "that we shall easily settle time and place; but I can say no more until I receive the manuscript." And he dug into his ice, as one who wished to put an end to the conversation.

"If the absence of the manuscript be the only thing in the way of the proposed interview," said the Pole, "I am happy to say that M. Adair is in possession of his original copy, that from which the transcript in England was made."

Aventayle was inclined to wax wroth at the man's pertinacity, but had been accustomed to deal with pushing authors, and others who do not let small matters stand in their way, and he restrained an impatient answer.

"I must wait for my own copy. It has some marks and notes upon it, which must be attended to. I suppose that your friend, the author, is not so ill as to make it necessary to lose no time?"

"We understand one another, Monsieur," said the Pole, smiling. "There is no objection to M. Adair's sending his piece to another manager, if he wishes?"

"I should be sorry to stand in the way of his interests."

"M. —— is a man of general accomplishments, and quite able to advise Mr. Aventayle as to the talents of any artist, literary or not."

"The least said, the soonest mended," said Mr. Aventayle; "and without going into other considerations, be good enough to tell your friend that I will return his play to him. Good morning, sir."

He paid, and was about to retire, when the Pole said,

"I am the last person to intrude, but if Mr. Aventayle finds that his friend, Mr. Hawkesley, cannot effect the object with which he came to France, they might do worse than accept a suggestion from me. The presentation of this card at the address which you have, will bring me to the Hotel Mirabeau, or anywhere else."

And this time M. Wolowski turned away to go.

"I believe that all these fellows in Paris are in a string," muttered Aventayle, "and get hold of one, you get hold of all. A word, sir, if you please,

You mentioned a friend of mine. Do you know him?"

"Not personally."

"Do you know his business in Paris?"

"I know what it ought to be. But as Mr. Hawkesley may not have been confidential with Mr. Aventayle, it is not for me to be indiscreet enough to say more."

And M. Wolowski turned away in earnest, and speedily disappeared.

"I don't know whether I served Hawkesley or not by letting this fellow go away without making him speak," said Aventayle; "but that I must ask him. Of course this man means to be found when he's wanted."

"I congratulate you, my dear Adair," said Wolowski, entering a small room above that in which the previous interviews between the spies had taken place. "You may return to your usual health as soon as you like."

He drew back the curtain of the window, and Adair, who had been seated in an arm-chair, with some costume of an invalid about him, hastily rose.

"He will not come?"

"He has been warned off you by the great man. He declines business."

"Then he is a fool. However, that is his affair," said Ernest.

"There are other theatres in London," said the Pole, "and it is not likely that every manager will

inquire of M. —— as to the character of the author who sends in a piece."

Adair made no reply.

"Vexed," said the Pole. "Actually and positively vexed because he has lost a chance of having a play submitted to an ignorant London audience. Have more ambition, my friend."

"Curse the play!" replied Adair, impatiently. "You do not think I am such an idiot. But there is an end. I think, M. Wolowski, you told me that you were about to give me some employment. It would be a charity, for my mind wants occupation."

"Mr. Hawkesley and Mr. Lygon wish to find Mr. Urquhart. Will you like to assist them in their researches?"

"Researches! As if he could not be found in a quarter of an hour."

"That is beneath you, then? Well, we must think of something else. Only, as you have so recently been ill, do not go out too soon into the air."

"Bah!"

"Obey orders, M. Adair," said the Pole, turning upon him with an imperative gesture. "Remain here until night, and it is not improbable that I may have something for you to do. At all events, wait and learn."

Ernest Adair looked at him steadily, and pursued him with that gaze as the Pole left the room. Ten minutes later Adair left the house.

"By Jove!" said the manager, as Adair's card was put into his hand at the hotel, "this is too much. He is so horribly afraid of losing a chance for his piece that, ill or well, he hunts me up. I am engaged."

But Adair followed close upon the *garçon*, and stood at the little table beside Aventayle.

"A gentlemanly-looking fellow, and there doesn't seem much the matter with him," was the dual thought that passed through Aventayle's mind. The next was the mental inquiry how to get rid, in the easiest manner, of a man who had been so very unfavourably recommended to his attention.

"Oh! I have seen your friend, M. Wolowski," said Mr. Aventayle, "and have explained my views to him. He will inform you of my intentions."

"M. Wolowski is a police spy, and I am another, and it is not of the play that I wish to speak to you, Mr. Aventayle," said Adair.

The manager's face, at this prompt speech, was again one of those studies in which the real play-lover, if such a person now exists, should have delighted.

"Have I been doing anything to offend the police?" he asked, with a certain touch of humour.

"Can I have some conversation with you?" said Adair, gravely, and without taking notice of the speech.

Aventayle had been warned against him, and had his own reasons for being displeased at the visit, and yet he yielded to the influence of Ernest

Adair's manner, and said, though not over-graciously,

"Well, yes, if you wish it."

"I must ask to see you in a private room."

"This way, then," said Aventayle. And as he preceded Adair upstairs, the manager said to himself, "I have locked my trunk, and I have got my watch on, and my money in my pocket. I don't see what harm he can do me. I am as tall as he, if he tries to murder me,—but I don't see what good that would do him."

With this pleasant review of his position, Aventayle led the way to his own room.

"I would repeat at once," said Adair, taking a seat, and speaking with seriousness, "that I have no intention of saying a word upon the subject of a play which I sent to you. I can quite understand that circumstances have induced you to consider you are better without it. There is an end of the matter."

"The play is a very clever play, nevertheless," said Mr. Aventayle.

"Let us forget it, if you please, Mr. Aventayle. I wish to speak upon a much more important matter."

"Which concerns me?"

"Not as a principal, but you will be glad—more than glad, I believe, to take part in it."

"Some swindling company, I dare say," thought Aventayle. "British and Foreign Dramatists' Mutual Friendly Translation Society, very likely. But he won't catch me."

"I believe I may assume that you, Mr. Aventayle, have had an interview with the chief of the police, and that you have heard from that gentleman a good deal which is not of the slightest consequence to our present conversation, but which I may conclude has helped you to your opinion of me."

"If, as you say, sir, you are connected with that estimable body, the police, you have the means of knowing tolerably well what everybody in Paris does."

"I am answered. I start therefore with the proposition that, so far as you have an opinion, it is that I am a person not to be trusted."

"Are you here to alter that opinion?" said Aventayle.

"No. Possibly to confirm it. But in doing so I may place at your disposal the means of serving friends of your own."

"It can do me no harm to hear you, M. Adair, though you certainly do your best to deter me from doing so."

"Your friend Mr. Hawkesley has come to Paris with his brother-in-law, Mr. Lygon, upon an errand of an exceedingly delicate character. I am perfectly acquainted with their object, and with all the circumstances of the story they have come to investigate. If you are not, and I think this must be the case, it will spare their feelings if you should learn the business from one who, like myself, is a mere legal machine, rather than from one of those closely interested."

"Mr. Lygon and his friend have come on a visit to Mr. Urquhart."

"Mr. Urquhart's wife having eloped from him, and Mr. Lygon's wife having previously left her husband. I see, Mr. Aventayle, from your face, that I need be in no doubt as to the amount of confidence which has been placed in you."

"Certainly," said Aventayle, as soon as he could recover from his astonishment at these revelations, "certainly I had no idea that anything so painful was connected with my friend's business here. I conclude that you must be telling me—"

"The truth?"

"I meant to say, telling me what is within your own knowledge."

"Perfectly, Mr. Aventayle: a statement which you will be the more ready to believe when I further inform you that I am the person who was mainly instrumental in involving both ladies in their—— misfortunes."

"You were the spy, the detector," said Aventayle, with an irrepressible gesture of disdain.

Ernest Adair smiled.

"I was more than that," he said; "but I did not come here to make a boast, but a bargain."

"What sort of bargain?"

"One into which I think you may enter without any imputation on your honour."

"Leave me to take care of that."

"I wished to imply that although it might be improper for me to make a proposal to one of the

gentlemen who are principally interested, it might be open to you, as their friend, to listen to me, without compromising them in any way."

"I have said that I am ready to hear you."

"I will speak, then, with as little regard to words as becomes a mere policeman. Otherwise, of course, I might enter into histories, offer extenuations, and so on. But I apprehend that my best chance of bringing you to my views will be by stating the case as nakedly as I can."

"And by leaving me time to test your story."

"You will find it self-tested; but if not, ask, in a whisper, a single question either of Mr. Hawkesley or his brother-in-law."

"Well, sir?"

"I must begin by saying that, in the case of one of the ladies whom I have named, there is no chance of bringing matters to a friendly arrangement. Mr. Urquhart's character, and the information of which he believes himself to be possessed, have made the affair a breach past healing; the lady has fled to England, and Mr. Urquhart himself is walking about Paris, like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, or rather seeking one person whom he wishes to devour."

"That is a most offensive tone in which to speak of the misfortune of an honourable man," said Aventayle; "but no matter. Who is the person he is searching for?"

"Myself."

"You?"

"Yes, I am the object of his wrath."

"Then you," said Aventayle, "have contrived in some way, I conclude, to poison his mind against his wife, and he desires to punish you."

The flush came over Adair's cheeks and forehead. Aventayle had struck him hard, unconscious that he was striking. That Adair should be the favoured lover of a well-placed lady—that had not entered the manager's head; that Ernest should be the dastardly spy who had betrayed, or, perhaps slandered her—that was likely enough. But Adair had mastered himself before he spoke again.

"It is not so, sir. Unfortunately, Mr. Urquhart believes he has reasons for thinking that I have injured his honour. No explanations of mine, or of others, could at present remove that conviction."

"They told me you were a rascal," said Aventayle, though he had scarcely intended to utter the thought.

"Be that as it may," said Adair, coolly. "There are so many standards of right and wrong that one hardly knows who is truly virtuous, unless it be a theatrical manager who exhibits a very pretty set of ballet-girls. But my present object is to show you that I am not so entirely a rascal but that, if it could be made worth my while, I could do something that even you would consider a good act."

"But you wish to be paid for it."

"Yes, and paid highly. But you will allow that I have to offer something which is worth a price,

when I tell you that I have it in my power to do for one of these unfortunate ladies what, unhappily, I see no chance of doing for the other."

"Of clearing her reputation?" asked Aventayle, eagerly.

"Of making her husband believe it cleared,—which will answer the same purpose," said Adair.

"Do you mean that you can manufacture a lie, and wish to be paid for doing it—that's plain speaking, I fancy?"

"Practical and to the purpose. No, Mr. Aventayle, I do not purpose to manufacture a lie. A lady has been condemned upon evidence which her husband has never had an opportunity of sifting so thoroughly as a man of the world should always sift evidence, unless he thinks he had better not investigate too closely. I desire to give him that opportunity, because I think that if he avails himself of it, he will regard the character of his wife in a new light, and possibly a favourable one."

"At present—"

"He believes that she is a fitting companion for her sister, who never deserved to be mentioned in the same day with Mrs. Lygon."

"And what do you propose?"

"I need not try to raise my market by dilating upon the cruelty of Mrs. Lygon's position, or upon the proud satisfaction which Mr. Aventayle would feel at having been instrumental in restoring a wife and a mother to her husband and her children," said Adair, in his cynical tone.

"Spare all that, and let me know how I am to convince myself that I should not be lending myself to a scheme for deceiving a man who may be in the right."

"The evidence which has condemned her shall be laid before you. If you deem it satisfactory, take no further steps. But if you think that she has been wronged, you will know what to do."

"That sounds fair; and if the whole story is not a falsehood from beginning to end, and I have no knowledge whatever that should make me believe it, I should not—so far as I see—be doing wrong in meddling in what is certainly not my own business. But I must ask some questions first."

"You will, perhaps, be sorry to have asked them when you see the effect your questions will have upon the two men who are now at the Hotel Mirabeau. But you have a right to be suspicious."

"Frankly, sir, I am more than suspicious. I am downright sceptical. There may be some family quarrels that have separated these couples, and you, for purposes which I do not understand, may be representing that guilt exists where there is only misunderstanding."

"The reading plays is a capital education, Mr. Aventayle, for sharpening the wit, but perhaps it occasionally leads to over-refinement. What can I gain by telling you a falsehood, for which I receive nothing, and which you can detect in the course of ten minutes?"

"Perhaps you want to revenge yourself on some

of these people by making them think that the world believes in scandals about them. How should I know?"

"The world knows too much about them already. But you will do me the favour to go to the Hotel Mirabeau, and make the inquiry whether I have misled you. If I add that you had better not mention my name, it is only because I am especially desirous to keep out of the way of Mr. Robert Urquhart. I have given you some guarantee of my honesty of purpose in what I have told you, for the assurance that Mrs. Lygon's case has not been fully comprehended will ensure you the warmest reception from Mr. Hawkesley."

"This is a wicked world, Mr. Adair, and the fewer people we trust the better, but I begin to think that you are telling me the truth."

"With every acknowledgment, Mr. Aventayle, let me, for the sake of saving valuable time, go on to my own part of the business. I have said that I can reproduce all the evidence which has condemned Mrs. Lygon. I will do so upon my own terms only."

"Of course—that is understood," said Aventayle, whose matter-of-course manner of saying it conveyed the impression which he had formed of his companion. But the latter did not wince, this time.

"I am in the employ of the police. I hate my work—or at all events, I am tired of it."

"And you wish to be independent?"

"I can earn an independence, but I wish to do it in my own way. I do not want much money: in fact, the sum I should perhaps stipulate for is scarcely worth mentioning. But I wish for an occupation in England — one in which what is known of my antecedents would not tell against me."

"England is not a very large place, but people have managed to live there *incog.* for years."

"That attempt would be hopeless for me. I am warned by my employers that if I presume to go to England, and accept occupation, any person who may engage me shall be informed of my history and character. And without seeking to blacken myself for a melodramatic purpose, Mr. Aventayle, I may say that no employer, so informed, would be justified in retaining me."

"This I was not altogether unprepared to hear," said Aventayle. "Then, into whose service do you wish to go?"

"Into yours."

"Well—you are very good—you are d—d insolent," stammered out the manager, in the excess of his astonishment. "What do you mean, sir?"

"What I say. I propose to you to give me an engagement at your theatre. I shall not ask exorbitant terms. I must live, and I wish to study acting, and if I do so to any purpose, you will be glad in due time to act liberally. I shall have the additional advantage of being able to defy the malice of my friends here, because, when they come to you

with their revelations, you will be able to answer, first, that you know everything, and secondly, that you care nothing."

"I perceive that you are quite incapable of comprehending the insult you are offering to me, and to the profession to which I have the honour to belong," said Aventayle.

"Come, Mr. Aventayle," said Adair, with much coolness, "we have hitherto spoken like men of the world. Do not let us infuse sentimentality into our talk, or pretend that we believe in the dignity of a trade that compels an educated man to pad his legs and smear his cheeks with paint to amuse any vagabond who can find sixpence to pay his way to the gallery."

"Sir," said Aventayle, in a rage, for he was a true artist, and if he hated the vulgar part of his audience, it was not that they were pleased with him, but because they did not appreciate him; "sir, you talk offensive folly, and a man who, holding such views, expects to rise in his art, had better go and hang himself, for he'll do no good in this world."

"It may be so," said Adair; "but you see I do not deceive you as to my notions of the calling I propose to adopt. I have now told you my terms, details excepted, and when you have convinced yourself that the facts are as I have stated them, send to me again. Perhaps I may not choose to come, but this will imply no disrespect to you, but will simply be a piece of caution. I will only add

that though I claim no merit in making the offer I have made, and, in fact, I make it only for the sake of attaining an object of my own, you, Mr. Aventayle, may render your friends a service which they will never forget—unless they are as ungrateful as most people's friends are."

"He speaks devilish well," said the manager to himself. "He has learned elocution somehow. M. Adair," he said, "not that the idea you have suggested is to be entertained for a moment, but—a—if you did come to England, you would not wish to retain your—your own name?"

"A bagatelle," said Adair, smiling. "Certainly not. You might call me Aventayle if you like, and make any romance about my pedigree."

He went out with a slight bow, and the manager sent something after him which sounded like an oath.

CHAPTER IV.

THE hotel at which Lygon and Hawkesley had taken up their quarters forms the square that encloses a large and oblong court-yard. Two of the quiet and comfortable apartments on the left hand as you enter the *porte-cochère* had been given to the brothers-in-law, and in one of these Charles Hawkesley found Lygon, who had not stirred since his companion left him.

"Your messenger has not returned," said Lygon.

"It would be impossible, my dear fellow, in this time. But it is of no consequence when he returns, for Urquhart has broken up house and home, and is wandering about Paris."

"I suppose so," said Lygon. "It is natural."

And he turned to the window.

"It is not natural," replied Hawkesley, "and it shows that the strength of mind of which he was so proud was no real strength, but a mere assumption. A sorrow comes upon him, and this wise strong man proves himself a coward."

"I understand you, Charles," said Lygon, turning towards him, "but I am past spurring. Where is Robert to be found?"

"We are to hear."

"I am not a coward, Charles."

"Why do you say so in that tone?"

"I do not know what tone I use. Do you know that my own voice sounds to me like that of a stranger, and of a stranger whom I hate."

"We will tune it again for you, Arthur," said Hawkesley, cheerfully.

Arthur Lygon made no reply, but wandered across the passage into the opposite room, and sat down at the window.

Charles Hawkesley wrote some letters, and an hour or more had passed when he heard his friend's voice.

"There is Aventayle."

"What does he want so soon, I wonder," said Hawkesley. "We were to meet at seven. He means to return home at once, perhaps," thought the author, "as his object is defeated."

Aventayle came up, and seemed relieved at not finding Mr. Lygon with his brother-in-law. Closing the door, he said,

"Only a few words, and if I have been made a fool of, you will forgive me."

"Not at all," said Hawkesley, smiling.

"It is not a matter to be spoken of lightly, and yet I hardly know how to approach it," said Aventayle.

"I should think that between us there need be no beating about the bush."

"That is true, but this is so very delicate a matter. You told me, though, that you were going to make a confidence to me."

"I was, and I am, and I hardly know why I delay it, for you have a right to it, after what has occurred, and yet I am reluctant to touch the subject."

"It has been put into my head that I can perhaps save you the trouble, and the pain. And yet I hardly know," hesitated Aventayle, "for what has been said to me is so—is so extraordinary, that I hardly like to ask you whether it can be true."

"Does it concern any member of my family?"

"Yes, indeed, two—four. Have I been deceived? —say yes."

"I wish that I could say yes, my dear Aventayle."

"Ah!"

"Whom have you seen?"

"Well, that I would rather not answer just yet, until I have had time to think over something. I hope, my dear fellow, that you will forgive me for alluding to the subject before you invite me to do so, but I have had a strange interview, and I came in here to know whether I had not been dreaming. Then there is real grief, affliction of the worst kind."

"In the case of one of my brothers-in-law, I confess I have no hope to hold out to him. In the case of the other," and he pointed in the direction of Lygon's room, "I hope and believe that I have not come to Paris in vain."

"That tallies with what I have heard. Now, having said so much, you must let me say a little more."

"Well, my dear Aventayle."

"They say that you can't touch pitch without being defiled, which is like most proverbs, an excuse for selfishness. I only know that I have had to touch a good deal in my time, and I hope that I am not much more defiled than other people. But still, we may as well keep away from it as long as we can. Is not this an oracular prelude?"

"It is not much in your usual way, and I know that you have got something to tell, and do not quite like to bring it out."

"It is this, then. I am told that—that new light may be cast upon circumstances of a painful kind, and that people—" and in his turn he indicated Arthur Lygon—"may be brought to see things as they do not see them now."

"Ah," said Hawkesley, eagerly, "have you been told something of my sister-in-law, Laura—Mrs. Lygon?"

"Look here. I am not afraid of touching pitch; but as I said, there is no need for any one to touch it before the time. I have had a strange story told to me. Before I can examine into it, I must, of course, have your leave to do so."

"Mine!"

"In strictness I should say *his*—but it is the same thing. Now, if I have your leave to go into the matter, I may be able—I don't say I shall be able—to do some good, and at all events you may, I think, rely upon me to do no harm. In a word, do you object to my inquiring into the history

that is making that man in the next room so wretched?"

"Use your own discretion, my dear Aventayle," said Hawkesley, shaking his hand kindly. "Between us, no more need be said."

"Not a word," said Aventayle, hurrying out. And he had scarcely departed when Lygon, still at his window, said,

"There is Urquhart."

The words were uttered in the same calm unimpassioned manner in which Lygon had spoken during the last few days.

Hawkesley sprang to the window, and saw Robert Urquhart looking up and down, as if unable to recollect the number of the apartment to which he had been directed. Charles Hawkesley ran down stairs into the court-yard to meet him.

Some one had given more attention to Urquhart's external appearance than he himself had been in the habit of paying to it. He was dressed plainly, but the loose and careless garb of the engineer had been exchanged for the ordinary surtout and decorous attire of a man of business. Save for his height and size there was nothing now in the outward appearance of Urquhart to attract attention. But the cheeks had sunk, and the eyes were hollow and restless, and there was a feverish and abrupt manner about him.

He shook Hawkesley's hand with some warmth, but instantly said,

"Is he with you here?"

"Arthur? Yes, certainly."

And Hawkesley beckoned to Lygon, who still sat at his window, to come down.

"What is that for?" said Urquhart. "I mean, why are you together?"

"Why, my dear Robert, what else should we be?"

"You are an honest man?"

"I trust so. Why do you say that?"

"Because—— What? Is he going to thrust himself on me?"

Arthur Lygon came out, and advanced towards the two men.

"We meet again, Robert," he said, in his melancholy voice, and mechanically holding out his hand.

Urquhart placed his hands behind him.

"I have nothing to say to you, Arthur Lygon," he said, sternly. "Nor did I come to seek you. There has been a time when I would have given you a rougher meeting, but we are in God's hands, and it is not for us to war with one another. But keep from me, man."

"I will not resent your language, Robert," said Lygon, flushing, nevertheless, with a man's anger at being so addressed. "I would rather wait and hear you justify it."

"Justify it. If your friend here wonders at what I say, it is because you have deceived him as you deceived me. Settle that between you when I am gone. In the meantime stand away. Stand away, I say, Arthur Lygon," he added with an imperious gesture, "for I will have no words with you."

"Your violence is of no avail, Robert," said Lygon, with calm resolution. "I must have many words with you, and serious ones."

"I will not speak to you. If you have aught to ask, do it through Charles Hawkesley. Do not follow me."

And with a motion of repulse, he placed his arm through that of Hawkesley, and led him—forced him, it might be said—from the place where they had stood.

"Yield to his wish for the moment, Arthur," said Hawkesley, "but trust me to have justice done you."

"It will not be done him in this world," said Urquhart, with a fierce scowl. "Walk with me, Charles."

And they turned away. Arthur looked after them with his melancholy smile.

CHAPTER V.

"WELL, why have you come, Charles Hawkesley, and why have you brought him with you?" was Urquhart's first speech, as they moved out of Lygon's hearing.

"To know the truth, and to have justice done," was Hawkesley's reply, given somewhat coldly, for he was irritated at Urquhart's demonstration of feeling against Arthur.

"The truth is soon told," replied Robert Urquhart. "As for justice, we'll say nothing of that until we can meet face to face with those whom we have to deal with. You sent for me?"

"Certainly."

"Well, I am here."

"I thank you for coming."

"Keep back thanks, and keep back everything else except what *must* be said. What do you want with me?"

"Is that the way to meet me, Urquhart? At the least you might remember that if I mix myself up in the sorrows of yourself and others, it is only from sincere and earnest sympathy, and this entitles me to be received with courtesy, to say no more."

"I have no wish to be uncourteous. But I am in no mood to receive sympathy, or to exchange

compliments. I should have been better pleased to see you, had you come alone."

"We can none of us act alone in this miserable business, Urquhart, and my object is to manage, if possible, that we should all act together, as becomes those who are so closely connected."

"Am I speaking to the friend of Arthur Lygon?"

"And to your own friend."

"Either, Charles Hawkesley, you are but half instructed by your friend there, or you came to insult me. I have not known very much of you, and I have known a good deal too much of him, and I would rather believe that he is keeping you in the dark, an art in which Mr. Arthur Lygon is a master, sir."

"I am glad that you believe in my good intentions, Robert. I have a right to assume that you regard me as a man of honour?"

"You have never given me any right to doubt it, until to-day, when I find you consorting with a man who is nothing of the kind. Well, I will suppose that you cannot well get rid of him as yet. Now then, will you tell me what you want with me?"

"Come up into my room."

Urquhart obeyed without answer, and they went up. Robert Urquhart seated himself, and waited until Hawkesley should address him.

"In the first place, Urquhart," said Hawkesley, "it is right to inform you that Mrs. Urquhart, who arrived in England, and took temporary refuge in my house—"

"Whence you thrust her into the street," said Urquhart sternly. "You need not ask my pardon for that.'

"I should have had to ask God's pardon if I had done aught so wicked," replied Hawkesley.

"What? You received her, welcomed her, comforted her, perhaps, and allowed your own wife to meet her."

"Welcomed her, no—for the rest, yes."

A bitter, almost a malignant smile came, for a moment, over the face of Urquhart.

"Ay," he said. "Well, you will doubtless reap your reward. All in good time, Charles, all in good time."

There was something offensively scornful in his manner, and yet his words were uttered in a tone of encouragement, almost commendation. But Hawkesley had strong mastery of himself, and had resolved that no provocation should stir him until he had sounded all the depths of the story which he had come to fathom.

"My reward, Robert," he said, quietly, "will be, I trust, in preventing wrong from being done."

"And is it as the ambassador of yon woman that you come to me?" asked Urquhart. "And does she send your friend with you as a witness to her virtues?"

"You have no right to speak to me in that tone, Urquhart. If it is necessary for me to say to you that the fearful affliction that has come upon you is also the heaviest sorrow of my own life, why, there

it is said, man. God help you! But I had indeed thought that you would have felt all that said over and over again in my coming to you at a time when ninety-nine men in a hundred would have sent you some letter of sympathy, and avoided your presence like a plague. I have come to you—are we to bandy words over sorrow like ours?"

He spoke with earnestness and even indignation, and the defiant expression faded from Urquhart's face, but he only answered:

"You have come to me, but I know not why."

"Then I will tell you why. And if I speak to you more harshly than I ought to speak to a man who is so unhappy, it is your own desire, Robert. You have before you as loyal and true a friend as you have ever known in this world, and you meet him with suspicion and insult. But he will not be the less true to you for that."

"I thought I had as good a friend yonder," said Urquhart, quietly, and with a slight sign indicating that he alluded to Lygon.

"Yes, you have indeed treated *him* well," said Hawkesley, reproachfully. "And I don't wonder that you would avoid meeting him. For what amends can you make to him for having permitted yourself, in an excess of rage and grief at your own affliction, to poison all the happiness of his life?"

Robert Urquhart listened to the words, and then seemed to be repeating them to himself, as if his own voice might give them a meaning which they had not brought to him. Then he said:

"As I had supposed. Read your brief, Charles, and then come and talk to me if you dare."

And he rose to go.

"No," said Hawkesley, firmly. "We do not part in this way. I put all relationship, all old friendship on one side. As one man of honour who requires an explanation from another, I call upon you to answer me the question why you have sought to make a wreck of Lygon's home?"

"Are you mad, too, like the rest?"

"Bah," said Hawkesley, "I am not to be met with scowls and mystic phrases. It is my trade to invent them, Urquhart, they have no magic for me. I ask you a question, and as you shuffle away from a reply, shall I help you half way with one. Shall I ask you whether it is possible that Robert Urquhart, whom we have esteemed and loved as the type of all that was just and honourable, has been so maddened by his own wrong, that he has descended to a revenge upon the only person within his reach?"

"You are a bold man, Charles Hawkesley."

"I thought so, before I met you, but there is little boldness, after all, in confronting a man who has been made a coward by his own act. What, that scowl again, Urquhart? Do not treat me like a school-boy. I thought that I was speaking to a man of the world, and he meets me with muttering and black looks. At least make me a man's answer, if we never speak again."

"Hawkesley," said Urquhart, with a painful

laugh. "I have heard that your wife loves you."

"I hope so."

"And that you value her love somewhat highly."

"It has brought me face to face with you—put your own value on it."

"Well, then, I will show you that I am your friend. Go back to England, and go to her, and if you think you know of an oath that will bind a woman's conscience, make her swear that oath never to speak again to a couple of women whom she can't help calling her sisters. That is my counsel to you, in return for the trash you have been led to talk to me, and there's coals of fire heaped on your head, my man."

He looked doggedly at Hawkesley while saying this, but the counsel sounded as if tendered in earnest.

"I am not surprised now, Robert, at this obstinate pretence—this affected persistence in injustice. The change that has come over you should have prepared me for language like this. My journey, so far as you are concerned, will be ineffectual. I find you resolved to abide by the wrong you have done. Be it so—we must undo that wrong without you. If I do not use strong words of protest against your cruelty, it is because I see for myself that you are not, in the fullest sense of the word, responsible for your conduct, and that the caution which was given me by M. ——, at the bureau, was not so gratuitous as I had believed."

"What caution's that?" said Urquhart, fiercely.

"The words are of no consequence. The inference was that it was not without consideration how far it was safe to entrust important duties to you that the Government had decided on preferring some contract tendered by M. Desgleaux—was that the name?—to one which you sent in."

The powder had been fired at last. Robert Urquhart sprang to his feet with flashing eyes, and with an expression of rage before which a brave man might have recoiled without stain to his manhood. The veins of his forehead stood out like rope, and his lips quivered so convulsively that they were almost useless in aiding his utterances.

"They have given a contract to Desgleaux!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"I think that was the name," said Hawkesley, affecting to consider.

"You know it was the name, man!" stormed Urquhart. "And perhaps it was this that the infernal impostors wished you to tell me, and therefore they took such pains to find me out and bid me come here. Soh! They give the contract to Monsieur Desgleaux, one of the greatest thieves who ever cheated his masters and his men."

"I know nothing of his character," said Hawkesley, calmly; "indeed, the gentleman's name came to my ears for the first time at the bureau—"

"And what were you doing at the bureau, my man?" said Urquhart, eyeing him askance.

"I had inquiries of my own to make, and

among them the inquiry where I could meet with you."

"And how dared you go to a gang of police to ask after me?"

"'Dare' is a silly word, and surely one may ask after one's brother-in-law's address in the place where that brother-in-law went to ask after the character of his wife."

Urquhart glared at him for a moment, and then, sinking down upon a chair, dashed his hands upon his face, and groaned, and the strong man's suffering was a terrible thing to behold. All the concentrated agony of the interview at which the proof of Bertha's guilt had been laid before him came back at the words of Hawkesley, and Urquhart writhed as he sat.

"It is for *her* sake," said Charles Hawkesley to himself, gazing remorsefully upon the man whom he had tortured. "He would have defied me to the last. It is for her sake, Robert."

"Hold your tongue. I will speak with you presently."

Some minutes elapsed before either spoke again. And when Robert Urquhart removed his hands from his face, it was deeply flushed with the intense pressure he had unconsciously put upon it, and he looked through dim eyes at the face of Hawkesley, and his large fingers were marked with the tears which he had vainly striven to keep from breaking forth. The look at Hawkesley was more touching than it seemed possible for

those strong features to assume—the proud face looked, for once, as if the brave defiant nature had battled to the last point of endurance, and must give way. Yet that look must have called up a fitting response in the face of Urquhart's companion, or the haughtiness of the Scot would have still struggled on. As it was, Urquhart looked earnestly at Hawkesley for a moment, and striding across to him took his hand in a warmer clasp than Robert Urquhart had for many a day given to man or woman.

"You have a sharp knife, my man," he said with a strange smile, "and you cut deep with it; but it's the kindest way with a bad case. But, go home, Charles—go home. You are basely deceived, and you are sent to try to deceive others. Cast away the cursed job; go home to your own good wife, and both of you forget that she has sisters, and that they have husbands. Would I say this to you if the thing were not?"

"You believe it, my dear Robert," said Hawkesley, in his turn taking his companion's hand for a moment. "You believe it, and are only doing your duty in striving to impress it upon me. But my duty, on the other hand, tells me to spare no pains to bring you, and those whose hearts are crushed by the sorrow that has come on us, to confess that we have wronged one who is innocent."

"You have been at the bureau," said Urquhart, in a low voice, and hastily. "What I learned, I doubt not you have learned too."

"I am not speaking, Robert," said Hawkesley, kindly, "of the sad story of one who is now lying, perhaps on her death-bed, in my house. Let no word of her be said between us. But we may speak—we must speak of her sister."

"A worse woman than herself," said Urquhart, in a low but judicial tone. "Yes," he continued, "a worse woman by far, Charles, because, without temptation, with a husband who was her constant companion and friend, which I could hardly be to yon poor feeble wretch that is gone, with children at her knee, which poor Bertha never had to comfort her, that woman gave herself over body and soul to the enemy."

"If it were so, Robert, what you have said were indeed a charge that should sink her beyond all reach of mercy. But does not the very blackness of that charge scare you from the belief that it can be just? With all that love and honour and happiness at home, is it conceivable that a wife should rush headlong to destruction?"

"The proofs have been laid before me, Hawkesley."

"I would not pain you by recalling the circumstances, but do yourself the justice to answer one question. You read those proofs, Robert, and what was the result? You consulted a second person as to their validity, and you were satisfied—so satisfied that you replaced that person in your unlimited confidence. What is *now* the value of that person's testimony?"

"But I read with my own eyes that which was all-sufficient to condemn. You hinted that my mind is not what it was, Charles—pooh! that's all over, you meant to rouse me at any price—but there had not been much to disturb it then. Would I have written to Lygon had I doubted—had I had the blessing of being able to doubt?"

"No. But you, an honest man, were dealing with one of the most finished scoundrels in Paris, and at that moment he was playing a terrible game, which I believe as yet you do not see."

"I can speak of it," said Urquhart. "I shall be ready to speak of it at fitting time and place until one day comes, and then I shall speak of it no more, because we will let the dead rest. That scoundrel *was* playing his last game, and seeking to hide his wickedness from me. He might have succeeded for some while longer, but for the chance that took me to yon accursed bureau."

"Chance," repeated Hawkesley, "may I ask what chance?"

"I wished to know what I could learn about him, and I thought I would write and ask his character. I was invited to call," he added, in a low voice, "and I called, and all was over."

"Do not dwell upon that," said Hawkesley, observing the flush that came over the Scot's face at the recollection. "I would only ask you whether you see nothing but chance in the discovery?"

"You are right, no doubt," said Urquhart, "and it is inconsistent to use the word, when we know

that there is no chance, and that all things are pre-ordained; but—"

"You mistake me," said Hawkesley, "I was not speaking in a religious sense—I should not have thought of making that suggestion to *you;* but I meant that the invitation to you to visit the bureau, and the preparation to receive you there, seem to me to hint at a determination by others that the character of this man should become known to you. While you imagined yourself a free agent, you were working up to the point to which it was wished to lead you."

"They were strangely prompt, that is certain," said Urquhart, thoughtfully. "And there were some preparations made, or *she* would not have been warned," he muttered. "It may be so, but I do not see that it was," he said; "I mean that I do not see that the police had aught to do with it, beside the answering my questions."

"I do, Robert; but all that I would impress upon you is that there is room for doubt even here, and that you may have been once more deceived."

"If it were so?",

"Then, does it not seem both reasonable and just to allow that, having been deceived twice in matters under your own eye, you may have formed a hasty judgment on another and the most important? You believe yourself convinced by the proofs tendered by that scoundrel against Mrs. Lygon, but you lacked confirmation of them, and

obtained a confirmation that was worse than worthless. Is it too much to say that you will reconsider that evidence?"

"Hawkesley," said Urquhart, turning suddenly on him. "This woman,—this Laura, has laid a strange hold upon your heart-strings."

"My own Beatrice excepted, Robert, there is no woman whom I ever loved so well, or for whom I would do so much."

"You come to France in the hope of clearing her character?"

"Yes, and I will come again and again for any shred or morsel of evidence that can serve her; unless, as I hope I shall, I take back with me all the proofs in one, that is to say, I take back Laura and her husband together."

"Does *he* believe—what you wish to believe?" asked Urquhart, in a curious voice, almost under his breath.

"He dares not, yet."

"Listen to me, Charles Hawkesley. I am one of the people called Christians, and I know what I am talking about, when I tell you that I hate Arthur Lygon."

"I am deeply shocked to hear you say it. If it were not for wounding you again—"

"You cannot wound me again, because you do not intend to wound me. I have learned more of your nature, Charles, in half an hour, than I had ever known before. I would have been glad that we had been more intimate; but that is over now.

Still, I will be your friend, if you will. You may say fearlessly what came to your tongue. I told you that I hated Lygon."

"I will not say it, Robert, exactly as I might have done on the moment, but I will remind you that when we have injured a person we are naturally disposed to think ill of him."

"It is neither once nor twice that you have charged me with doing wrong to Arthur Lygon," said Urquhart, gravely. "Do you know the wrong that he did me? Do you know that he was aware of the wickedness that had been practised upon me, that I was taking a false woman to my arms and my heart, and that he could nevertheless come under my roof, and could take my hand and keep silence as to my dishonour? Do you know that he accepted services from me—that is little or nothing, except that it shows his nature—that he could admit me to his confidence, and sit by my side, and at my table, and let me talk to him of the happiness of a home sanctified by a true woman's love, and beg him not to misjudge this very Laura—and that all this time he was jeering at me from the corner of his heart, knowing that *I* was the blind and cheated husband?"

"Was it for him, Robert Urquhart, to betray Bertha to you? He believed that she had repented, and he remembered that his wife was her sister."

"Is that your defence of your friend?"

"You will not hear him make his own."

"No. Do not let him come near me. I shall

remember the parting when I almost prayed him to discharge all vile suspicions from his mind, and some day to tell his happy wife that Robert Urquhart had pleaded for her when appearances were against her. He looked kindly and gratefully into my face, and I, blind fool, could not read that he was mocking the dishonoured man who was trying to comfort and reassure *him*. This is the man whom I have wronged, because I was truer to him than he dared to be to me, and because, when I discovered his dishonour, I was enough his friend to prevent his being longer deceived."

"Robert, he could answer all this to you far better than I can answer it for him; and it may be that you are once more deceived, and that while you suppose him to have ample knowledge of the sad story, he had but suspicions—perhaps less evidence than you have obtained against Laura. But let us grant that the worst is true, and that Arthur, from timidity, or what cause you will, concealed that which a friend ought not to have concealed—will you still, will you therefore, do an injustice? Will you refuse to help me to re-investigate this melancholy case, only because the clearing this poor girl's character will restore happiness to a man whom you say you hate?"

"Whom I *do* hate."

"Put it so, and answer me."

"It is a frantic and a useless course, Hawkesley. The evidence that was shown to me will not have been laid before your own eyes for five minutes,

before you pronounce the same sentence that I was forced to pronounce."

"Letters, I think," said Hawkesley, in a low voice.

"Letters. I understand you. Letters—not one or two, though," said Urquhart, with compressed lips; "those few lines were enough to damn a fame on which I would have risked my own life, here and hereafter. No, Charles, but a volume—a series of accursed letters in which that unhappy woman made known her guilty passion, and branded herself as—well, shall we say—"

"No matter for the word," said Hawkesley, impatiently.

"But it does matter," said Urquhart, looking at him once more with a strange expression. "For in the vile jargon of those who make delicate distinctions in crime, and shadow away the blackness of the sin to which God has given one name only, there are offences of the heart, it seems, as well as mere shamelessness. Some of you—I mean some of you writers, Hawkesley—I am told make apologies for the adulteress if she can excuse herself by saying that not only did she hate her husband, but that she loved some one else. I would call this a fearful aggravation of crime, but sentimentalists know better. Well, you will find that there is ample scope for apology when you come to read those letters."

"How?" said Hawkesley, eagerly.

"I do not know that there is any mention of her

husband: but not only is there plenty of love for another, but it is expressed so plainly that—you do not seem to like to hear it, Hawkesley—so I will only say that if the one lover was not in the way, I doubt that the writer would have broken her heart, unless it were just impossible to find another. Why do you clap your hands, man? Is that so good a hearing?"

"Is it *not?*" said Charles Hawkesley, excited. "Urquhart, Urquhart, you have given me more comfort than you can imagine. Now, you must help me to a sight of these letters."

"And what have I told you that gives you such a comforting assurance?"

"Do you not see, my dear Robert? You have described the letters of a sensualist, of a profligate woman. Look in the eyes of Laura Lygon, and ask whether they could ever have guided her pen through such vileness. She write such letters! Robert, you have indeed done her wrong, and you will help me to repair it."

"I have not had occasion, in my life," said Urquhart, "to be much acquainted with women," and he spoke with a simple, natural pathos that at once arrested the attention of his excited companion. "I wish it had pleased God that I had never had aught to say of them beside that they were my fellow-creatures. I know but of two types, the chaste and the unchaste, and I was bid to honour the one and despise the other. It seems that I know far too little, and that there are bad women

whom we are to esteem, and good women whom we are to detest. I will not live long enough to come over to that new belief—the old one that I was taught as a lad is quite good enough for me. But since you seem to have taken up with the new doctrine, and can find comfort in the distinctions of sin, I will do what I can for you. But when the Dead Sea apple turns to ashes as you crunch it, Charles, do not blame me, who bade you leave it where the Devil had flung it. I believe that I see more, now, than you will tell me; nor is it right that you should tell me what is in your heart."

"I do not comprehend you, Robert."

"Maybe as well as I comprehend myself. But let that pass. If you deem I have done wrong, it is fitting I should clear myself. But I will have neither part nor lot in the matter, if Arthur Lygon comes into our council."

"Assuredly I shall not press that, Robert. I have perfect liberty to act as I may think best. Now, where are these letters?"

"There is but one way of getting at them, which is through yon bureau."

"What, they are not in your possession?"

"Thank God, they are not."

"But in whose?"

"Nay, I know not. They were laid before me and my—before me and Mrs. Urquhart in the drawing-room at Versailles by the scoundrel, who made it a condition that they should be returned to him when I had read them; and they were."

"By the scoundrel! Who was this?"

"Is there more than one such a villain, man? Why, this Adair."

Hawkesley gasped as if a weight had suddenly been lifted from his chest.

"Adair. *He* produced the letters? And you permitted any letter that he could produce to weigh one grain in the balance against Laura Lygon? Thank heaven that I came over to sound this matter to the bottom. O Robert, let me say it again, you have indeed a debt to pay to Arthur Lygon."

"I will be ready to own my obligation when I comprehend it," said the Scot.

"We'll talk of that another time. The first thing is to lay hands on Mr. Adair. I shall have to use the police after all; but what matter if I can only secure these evidences? Robert, I beg your pardon," he said. "In the excess of my pleasure at seeing, as I believed, the exculpation of Laura, I ought not to have forgotten that in your presence a member of her family has no right to be aught but humiliated."

"I understand you better than you will own," said Urquhart, sadly. "Do you wish me to go with you to the bureau?"

"Certainly not, my dear Robert," replied Hawkesley, shocked at the humility of the tone in which Urquhart spoke. "But when I obtain these letters, I shall be entitled to call on you to read them once more."

"You will not ask it, but go your own way."

And Charles Hawkesley's way was to the bureau again, as speedily as he could be conveyed thither.

"So soon returned, Mr. Hawkesley?" said M. ——, as the Englishman was again ushered into the presence of the chief of the police, "You are the more welcome, and promptitude is an inestimable gift in this world."

"I must risk the chance of your thinking me easily turned from the views I held this morning, M. ——."

"That means that you are prepared to permit me to assist you, I hope?"

"Indeed it does."

"I expected no less from your common-sense. I was only afraid lest the proud insular nature,"—and M. —— laughed at his phrase,—"might prevent you at once acting upon the dictates of your judgment. You have seen Mr. Urquhart?"

"He has been with me, and has made a revelation which, had you been kind enough to add to what you told me of this man, Adair, would have perhaps spared you the trouble of a double interview."

"I suppose that I understand you. But I preferred that you should hear from your brother-in-law what perhaps you would scarcely have been inclined to believe from me. I am to infer that if you had any hostility to this ill-advised M. Adair when you and I parted, it has not been decreased by anything which you have since heard."

"He is a double-dyed miscreant, M.——. But I should be past the stage of using hard words."

"Then it becomes more and more my duty to keep him out of the way, I conclude."

"Pray let me speak seriously. When I was here before I said that I would not hold out a finger to save him if he were in the hands of his worst enemy—"

"Mr. Urquhart?"

"Yes, he was so, then, in my judgment. But others have a right to hate him more deeply."

"Your brother-in-law, Mr. Lygon?"

"And myself. But it sounds almost childishly for me to say that Adair would now be safer in my hands than in those of any man in the world."

"Yes, until he has given certain explanations. Now, to get hold of him, my dear Mr. Hawkesley, we must be orderly and rational. I could place him in that chair in seven minutes from this time, but what good do you imagine would result to you?"

"He has documents which I must see."

"Do you think that he would bring them—or send for them—or acknowledge their existence?"

"Under your eye I suppose that a negotiation might be arranged," said Hawkesley. "I conclude that he is open to bribery?"

"What!" said M. ——, with an affectation of surprise. "A police agent bribed, and under the eye of his chief. Your practical good sense is scarcely serving you at need, Mr. Hawkesley."

"I perceive," said Hawkesley, "that you intend to assist me, M. ——, and I acknowledge I was wrong in not asking you to do so in your own way."

"Meet me here to-morrow at one. In the meantime take no step whatever."

"I place myself in your hands, and I rely upon your friendship, M. ——."

"You shall repent neither the act nor the trust, Mr. Hawkesley."

CHAPTER VI.

"WHEN I have mentioned, Madame, that I have the honour to hold one of the higher offices under the Minister of Police, I shall, I trust, do away with any idea of indiscretion or intrusion."

The words were addressed by M. —— to Mrs. Lygon, who received him in a small parlour leading off from the room which served as a hall, kitchen, and general place of assembly in the house in which she lodged at Versailles.

Mrs. Lygon received the official with a certain tremor, which did not escape his watchful eye, but his manner was reassuring, and she replied, with a smile,

"Has so quiet a person as myself done anything to call for the censure of the police?"

"Pray think better of our appreciation of those who honour us by a *séjour* at Versailles. My sole object in alluding to my official position was to relieve myself from any suspicion of impertinence. I may add that I have the honour of being known to Mr. Urquhart, and to Mr. Hawkesley, who has just arrived in Paris."

"Charles Hawkesley has come over?" said Mrs. Lygon.

"Yes, and I think will soon be Mrs. Lygon's visitor."

"Was it to tell me this that you have been kind enough to call?"

"In part; for without troubling Mrs. Lygon with reasons and histories about things gone by, I have ventured to feel a strong interest in certain matters which concern her, and have even indulged in the hope that I may be useful. Meantime it occurred to me that Mr. Hawkesley's visit would probably take Mrs. Lygon by surprise, and I wished her to know that he might be expected."

The conversation between M. —— and Laura was protracted for a considerable time, and the kindly manner of the official produced its effect upon one who had for so long been living in a state of excitement, who had found it needful to guard herself against others, and who had in short been exposed to the atmosphere least congenial to a frank and affectionate nature. M. —— slightly sketched some of the incidents with which the reader is acquainted, but did so in a way that showed that he was perfectly acquainted with the whole story, and he gradually led up to the revelation of his earnest wish that she should return to England. Mrs. Lygon listened with earnestness, spoke little, but thanked M. —— for the interest he took in her welfare.

Just as the interview was concluding, and the courteous official had risen to go, he said—

"I had forgotten something which I ought to

have remembered. I have a trifling matter to place in Mrs. Lygon's possession. It came into my hands by accident, and I am glad to restore it."

He placed a small sealed packet in her hand, and took his leave.

Laura opened the packet.

It was a photograph, in which her three children were grouped together. A photograph that had been taken in her own presence on some happy holiday—Walter's birthday—and that had been one of her little household treasures ever since. With it came to her all the recollections of home, of love, of children's laughter, of—

"Oh, my darlings, my darlings!" cried the mother, and her tears fell like summer rain. "I *must* see you again."

CHAPTER VII.

"THE photograph was a good thought, M. Adair," said M. ——, the same evening, "and I compliment you on the forethought which secured it at the moment when Mrs. Lygon was leaving her house, under circumstances that might have made her companion unmindful of small matters. But it is in trifles that the true artist is seen."

Adair listened undemonstratively. He had his own game to play now, and knew that evil eyes were upon him, and he had small attention to bestow upon words, except in so far as they indicated the intentions of those with whom he had to deal. But he had resolved to be his own friend for once, and the graceful condescension of the head of the department had no fascinations for him. In earlier days he might have deemed it a fortunate omen that he was summoned to that presence, and might have dreamed of a confidential trusting, or at all events, of a recognition of talents that should thereafter be employed with distinction. But, ambitious and vain as he was, Ernest Adair had learned too much in the hard and cruel school to which a bad man places himself, to believe in any future save that which he should himself create. And he sat in M. ——'s presence,

not only prepared, but resolved, to sell himself and aught he had, or was thought to have to sell, to the very best advantage his cunning might obtain for him.

"I have chosen to be frank with you, M. Adair," said M. ——. "There is a class of men, rarer, I am sorry to say, in our sphere than they should be, who can but be dealt with in a straightforward manner. I need not tell you that it has been M. Wolowski's duty to make me aware of your antecedents."

"So far as the poor man knows them," said Adair, with an excellent imitation of the laugh with which, in talking to an equal, a man derides the blind zeal of an inferior.

"So far as the poor man knows them," replied M. ——, with a smile. "I dare say he has taken all pains to be well-informed, and we will not expect miracles."

"I trust, M. ——, that you will appreciate the motives that prevented my affording the worthy man the assistance which I should have offered to any other inquirer."

"You consider that Wolowski has ill-treated you, and you hate him," said the chief.

"You have exactly expressed my feelings, sir."

"Of course I must regret the circumstance that those who act for me cannot act harmoniously with one another; but so long as their differences do not interfere with their duties to me, I have nothing to say. I am bound, however, to observe

that M. Wolowski has made no complaint against you, M. Adair."

"A forbearance in which I recognise his habitual cunning."

"You are resolved to see no good in him," said M. ——, smiling. "Perhaps you don't like ugly men. I share somewhat of that prejudice myself But we must take men as we find them, my dear M. Adair. Now to talk business."

"As if we had not talked business already," thought Adair.

"You desire to abandon a profession in which you have had many chances of distinguishing yourself—and some of which chances you have not thrown away—and you propose to take to the stage. Mr. Aventayle is, I think, rather favourably disposed towards you, on account of the extreme frankness with which you laid your propositions before him."

"Yes, I spoke plainly enough."

"The only point of importance which you seem to have omitted, and which of course I take it for granted you reserved for discussion with me, is the probability of your obtaining your *congé* from the bureau."

"I had reason to think that I should have little difficulty on that head, after the pains which M. Wolowski had taken to convince the bureau that my services were valueless."

"And when did you form the opinion that I permit myself to be convinced by the representa-

tions of M. Wolowski? So far from that, M. Adair, I tell you without hesitation that I regard you as a very valuable officer who has been injudiciously employed, and that I had resolved to accredit you upon a task of a very different character from anything that M. Wolowski had employed you to perform."

"Earlier, M. ——, such information would have been very flattering to me."

"Now, you care neither for appreciation nor trust, and you are dying for the *coulisses*. Happy enthusiasm—it shows that you are too young to be spared. You must continue to serve the public, M. Adair, a little longer, after which you will be at liberty to delight them."

"I have to ask you, formally, for dismissal, M. ——."

"As formally, M. Adair, I have to refuse it."

Ernest Adair smiled, and slightly bowed. He merely said, "I regret your determination, sir. That is all that is necessary for me to say."

"Yes," said the chief, looking hard at him. "That is all, because I can read the rest without your aid. Refused permission to leave the service, M. Adair dissembled his anger, and affected to resign himself to the wish of the bureau. He even undertook a duty of some delicacy, and soon afterwards, availing himself of the numerous resources at his command, he made his escape to England. There he sought out the theatrical manager with whom he had been in negotiation in

Paris, and who, as M. Adair had justly concluded would be the case, regarded only the interests of his theatre, and engaged the refugee. He made his first appearance on the stage with a success which, had he been permitted to follow it up, might have inaugurated a triumphal career. But—" And M. ——, who had been speaking off, as it were, from a newspaper record of some catastrophe. was suddenly silent.

Ernest Adair did not reply.

"Have you no curiosity to hear the end of the paragraph that will interest so many persons when it appears in our journals?"

"As you please, sir."

"You have guessed the conclusion, then."

"Indeed I have made no attempt to do so."

His chief looked at him rather dangerously.

"Try to guess it now, M. Adair."

"I used to be good at riddles, M. ——, but I have told you that I am not what I was, and shall do you but little credit in future."

"You please me much, on the contrary, M. Adair, and show me that you have shrewdness, determination, and courage. Decidedly we shall not part with you. Still, I should like you to finish my paragraph. Why did not the name of M. Ernest, or whatever name M. Adair took, appear twice upon the bills of the English manager?"

"For the same reason, perhaps," said Adair, with the utmost coolness, "that a certain M. Silvestre, formerly in this honourable service, spoke

only once at a debating society near Leicester Square."

"Ah! you recollect that fact.'

"I was not, however, in England at the time, M. ——."

"Nay, my dear Adair, zealous as you doubtless have ever been for the honour of the service, it would have been unreasonable to expect you to carry your devotion to the point to which some friends of poor Silvestre carried theirs. By the way, his head was never found."

"No," said Adair, smiling. "He could do without it. He lost it when he trusted one of his employers. It was a sad weakness in poor Silvestre."

"You are a brave fellow, Adair," said his chief, warmly. "And though, as matter of business, I beg you to forget no part of our conversation, it is much more pleasant to me to discuss business in another way."

"I am at your orders."

"How Wolowski and you could have misunderstood one another I cannot think," continued M. ——. "For prejudice apart, Adair, he is anything but a fool, and must have seen what good stuff there is in you."

"He has quite brains enough to discover the men of whom he had better be jealous," said Adair; "but I have no wish to discredit the bungler in the eyes of his patron. When there is question of employing him in a really serious matter, it might

be worth while to ask me for proofs of his fitness to conduct it—meantime he is quite good enough for the pocket-picking, key-forging, letter-stealing business."

"The affectation of contempt is a little overdone, my dear Adair; but I am glad to gather that you are content to stay in the service in order to be ready to expose M. Wolowski when the time comes. Would you like his place?"

The sudden demand made Adair look up with surprise, but he immediately suppressed all evidence of emotion.

"I could not fill it with advantage. Besides, though I hate M. Wolowski, I would not wrong him, and I know that you have promised him that his place shall be given to a person of his own recommendation."

"You are misinformed."

"I am bound, of course, sir, to accept your statement; but M. Wolowski, doubtless supposing that he has authority, has promised the post to his intended son-in-law, or whatever relative a man is who marries a girl that may possibly be one's illegitimate daughter."

"Do you allude to M. Chantal?"

"That is the fortunate person, as I need not tell M. ——."

"He will neither marry the girl nor have the place, M. Adair," said the chief, with a curious smile.

"All the same to me," said Adair, in French.

"But you ought not to speak with so much indifference of the lady," replied M. ——, "as she, like yourself, has a vocation for the theatre, and for reasons which it might not greatly delight M. Chantal to hear, is likely to have her wishes indulged at an earlier date than yours will probably be gratified. She only requires some preliminary instruction, which I have reason to think that a friend will procure for her."

The smile on M. ——'s face as he said this told Adair a little story of temptation and infidelity which gave him sincere pleasure, inasmuch as the person to be chiefly injured was his friend M. Chantal. But he had still sufficient self-command not to permit his natural gratification to put him on better terms with his artful companion.

"Poor M. Chantal! You will need to make him some reparation," said Ernest, "for she is an exceedingly pretty personage."

"And that is something to be admitted by the fastidious admirer of lofty English beauty," replied M ——. "Now, Adair, how are we to satisfy the grave Arthur Lygon that he ought to take home his fair wife to England with him?"

"I have really given no consideration to the question."

"I request your best consideration to it, M. Adair," said his chief, gravely, and in a voice that was full of meaning.

"In that case," said Adair, answering the tone of the speaker, rather than his words, "I have to revert

to my own undesirable position here, and to my wish to be released from it."

"You are so wrong on all that, Adair, that I am sorry you re-introduce the topic. But for the purposes of conversation, suppose that the public could dispense with your services, or could employ them in England—what advice do you give to the friends of the amiable Lygons?"

"We are still at some distance from the consideration, M. ——. Pardon me if I say that it may be beneath the dignity of your position to discuss details with a subordinate on the eve of discharge. The friends of the Lygons had better come to me."

"That has been proposed," said M. ——, with a mocking look. "But in truth the interview promised so little that could be agreeable to yourself, that I thought it a friendly part to decline it on your behalf."

"I dare say that I can manage to avoid brutality, should it be menaced," said Adair.

"Nay, I know your bravery, Adair. A man who disarms one enemy and stabs another in the same fortnight can afford to assume a pacific attitude without reproach. But I wish you to be the gainer by this transaction; and, therefore, I have taken it into my own hands. Consider *me* the friend of the Lygons."

"You, M. ——?"

"Yes, and as both qualified and desirous to make the best terms with you. It will never do for you

to go to the English theatre with a tainted reputation, and to read in a criticism on your performance that you played the villain so well as to surprise those who were unacquainted with the advantages you had enjoyed in studying the part."

"I do not accept that suggestion as intended to diminish my terms, M. ——."

"No. But the idea is worth your keeping in mind. Well, you have the power to make this British lily as white as the snow—what is your charge for the detergent process?"

"You take that power for granted."

"I take your word for it."

He struck the bell, and Mr. Aventayle was ushered into the apartment.

"I understood you to say, Mr. Aventayle," said M. ——, continuing the conversation as if the manager had been present all the time of the interview, "that M. Adair assured you he had the means of removing the unpleasant doubts which interpose between Mr. Lygon and the lady who bears his name."

"With a certain qualification," said Aventayle, "which I did not like at the time, and like still less the more I think of it."

"Will you explain?"

Adair slightly smiled.

"I see nothing to cause amusement," said Aventayle. "Mr. Adair did not say to me, like an honest man—the lady is perfectly innocent, and the victim of mystery and slander; but he merely

offered to make the husband believe that this is the case. The more I think of that speech, the more I seem to see a fraud and a cheat in the transaction."

"I make no doubt," said M. ——, "that M. Adair will explain to you that he merely used a certain diplomatic reticence, and that he meant all that you wished him to mean."

"Reticence, or whatever you call it, when an honest woman's character is at stake, seems to me d—d like scoundrelism," said Mr. Aventayle. "I see you look as if you thought I used strong words, and I am glad of it, because I mean them to be strong."

It may here be remarked, that though there was no part of any day, or night, in which the excellent Aventayle would not have entertained the sentiments which he now put forth, the fact which tended to his expressing himself somewhat more bluntly than he might otherwise have done, was the fact that he had dined.

"We all speak in our own way," said M. ——. "Adair speaks cautiously; you, Mr. Aventayle, with honourable frankness; but we have only one object."

"It may be so," said Aventayle. "But before I take a single step in this business, I have made up my mind to have a straightforward answer from that man," and he pointed to Ernest Adair,—"in reply to one straightforward question which I mean to put to him."

"Before you put it, Mr. Aventayle—and I may say that I have no doubt of your receiving the most satisfactory answer—let me inform you that Mr. Hawkesley has been with me, and has seen fit to entrust to me the obtaining the evidence which is to exculpate the lady whom we all desire to serve."

"It is taken out of my hands, then? I am heartily glad of it."

"It is in no sense taken out of your hands, Mr. Aventayle. My only reason for mentioning the fact is, to show you that we are working together. Now, suppose you ask the question which you are anxious to put."

"I see the business is handed over to others," persisted Aventayle, "and I am glad of it. But it can do no one any harm for me to have my mind satisfied. Now, Mr. Adair, will you be good enough to tell me in plain English, and without any d—d reticence, as your friend calls it,—will you be so good, sir, as to tell me this? Is Mrs. Lygon really a good woman, or are you only going to try to make it believed that she is a good woman? Answer that sir, as you sit in that chair."

"All women are good, Mr. Aventayle," replied Ernest Adair, "only some are less fortunate than others in having their goodness detected. I believe Mrs. Lygon to be a very good woman. I hope the answer is plain enough

"It is nothing of the kind, sir. You keep the word of answer to the ear, and break it to the hope. All women are not good, and I myself have known,

and do now know, some infernally bad women. But you are eluding my question, and I am more glad than ever that I am to have nothing to do with the matter in hand."

"Mr. Aventayle," said M. ——, "I do not think that you will be able to justify yourself in abandoning a task which you undertook voluntarily, and which you can perform with great benefit to your friends."

"Not if I am refused the truth."

"I am unable to see in what form of words M. Adair can meet your demand, if you are at present unsatisfied. I understand you to wish to know whether the imputation which is supposed to rest upon the character of a certain lady be false or just."

"Yes, that is it. Let him answer with one word."

"Will you do so, M. Adair?"

"I will. And I answer, Both."

"There comes the accursed riddle again," said Aventayle, fiercely.

"A riddle which it will be M. Adair's pleasure to explain. I invite him to do it," said M. ——, looking at Ernest Adair with an expression which meant command, if not menace.

Ernest Adair rose, pushed away the chair in which he had been seated, and drew towards him one of a more luxurious kind, a sort of lounging-seat. Placing himself in this—with no ostentation of swagger, but rather with the calm demeanour of

one who has serious business to consider seriously, Adair leaned back, joined his fingers, and, after a pause, said:

"I have no wish to be obstructive, or unreasonable. But I find myself invited,"—and he laid stress upon the word,—"to offer some explanations which may undo all that I have been endeavouring to do for my own advantage for many months past. I am perfectly sensible of the force of all the arguments that have been used in this room, before Mr. Aventayle's arrival, and since he did us the honour of joining us, but I have heard nothing that induces me to think that the time has come for me to take an active part in the business we have been discussing."

"But you have taken that seat that you may sit at ease and be convinced, I suppose?" said Mr. Aventayle, and the remark drew an approving nod from M. ——.

"Yes," said M. ——. "M. Adair desires to show that he will be patient in listening to argument."

"It makes me indignant," said Aventayle, "that such a matter should be a subject of bargain and sale, for that I conclude is what is meant."

"M. Adair is not a rich man, and desires to be a rich man," said M. ——. I believe I state his position accurately."

"Mr. Aventayle," said Adair, "has only himself to thank for any scandal or annoyance that may arise from this negotiation. I did myself the

honour to see him, and to explain to him the terms upon which I would act. I now find that Mr. Lygon has been placed under far more exalted patronage,"—a glance at M. ——, "and information that was to be obtained upon very easy terms this morning has since risen in value."

"With certain drawbacks," said his chief.

"Which make it the more necessary that the price should be kept up."

"I swear," said Aventayle, "that it makes my blood boil to hear the subject treated in this way. Call it your play, man, and fancy that we are higgling about the price of that; put it on that footing, and don't sit there saying that you know how to save a lady's honour, but you will not do it until we have to bid up to your mark. You have got a play to sell. What's the price of it?"

"Is that put fairly enough?" said M. —— to Adair.

"No," said Ernest, with effrontery. "It may surprise you to hear me say this, but it pleases me upon the present occasion to be treated with deference and gentlemanly courtesy. I have the power to compel them from you, Mr. Aventayle, and as it may be the last opportunity I shall have of asserting my social position, I shall maintain it to the best of my ability. I refuse to make a vulgar bargain, under pretext of selling a play, and I demand to be treated as M. ——, and no one better knows how to treat a gentleman."

"You are growing a Sybarite, my friend,"

said M. ——, with a slight manifestation of disdain.

"My humour must be indulged, nevertheless."

"Or?" asked M. ——, "for there is an alternative to everything."

"Or M. ——, having undertaken to manage a delicate arrangement for his English friends, will have to confess himself baffled and defeated."

"There being no one who can give the information but yourself?" said M. ——, carelessly.

"I have not said so, M. ——," replied Ernest, smiling.

"Impossible that I should ever consent to part with you, M. Adair," said his chief, admiringly. "Well, Mr. Aventayle, it appears to me that the best course in all cases of difficulty is to consider the object we have in view, and then to take the readiest means for gaining it, no matter whether these are the means that we should willingly have selected. Our object, at this moment, is to procure the exculpation of a lady, and our friend here proffers his aid upon the not very hard terms that he shall be treated like a gentleman, and rewarded as a gentleman should be. He has not met us unfairly, for he has revealed to us that there is a mixture of truth and falsehood in the charges that have been made against that lady, and I dare say will not object to tell us that there is a great deal more of falsehood than of truth in them. In return for that statement, and for the information which we require, we shall be happy to show ourselves

grateful in any way he will point out. As he has been kind enough to refer specially to me, perhaps it may be as well that I should conduct the negotiation, and I will now suggest that you, Mr. Aventayle, see your English friends, inform them of what has passed, and remind Mr. Hawkesley of his appointment with me to-morrow."

"I don't see what better I can do," said Aventayle. But when the door was closed upon him he clenched his fist, and shook it in a menacing manner in the direction of those whom he had left inside, and he went out muttering an expression of the strongest conviction that one of the parties, and not impossibly both, would hereafter come in for the benefit of any arrangements that may have been made in conformity with the Calvinistic scheme of final retribution.

CHAPTER VIII.

AVENTAYLE hurried back to the hotel in quest of Hawkesley. The anger and excitement which had been caused by what the honest-hearted manager regarded as the cold-blooded and calculating villany of Adair had operated to dispel the slight fumes of the dinner, and when he reached the court-yard he felt in a strangely uncomfortable condition. He had mixed himself up in an affair of which he by no means saw the end, and his straightforward nature revolted against his being made a party to a scheme which did not now appear to him in the bright and chivalrous light in which he had at first regarded it. However, he resolved to give Hawkesley the full benefit of his doubts and fears, and the moment he found his friend, Aventayle plunged *in medias res*.

He gave an account of his meeting with Adair, and a tolerably faithful narrative of what has been already told, except that his extreme dislike of Adair perhaps induced him to colour up the affected insolence of the latter into melodramatic effrontery.

"We know him to be a rascal, my dear Aventayle," said Hawkesley, "and what matters his swaggering a little more or less? The point I want to get at from you—only you are a little too angry

to be precise—is whether M. —— succeeded in bringing him to terms?"

"Bless you, he is M. ——'s master, at least in this instance," said Aventayle. "Threw himself back in an arm-chair; declared that he would be treated like a gentleman; would not state his terms; and gave himself as many airs as if he had the Koh-i-noor to sell, and didn't care a farthing whether anybody bought it or not."

"Then nothing new was learned from him?"

"Not in my hearing, except new proof that he is a scoundrel. That is the fellow who wants to come to me!"

"How do you mean, Aventayle?"

"Wants me to bring him out at my theatre."

"Ernest Adair!"

"Well, not by that name. He was good enough to propose that I should call him Aventayle, if I liked, and produce him as a lost child of my own, I suppose."

"He proposed to you that he should be brought out in London?" repeated Hawkesley.

"Yes. What do you make of that, besides impudence?"

"I scarcely know. Yet, if he is half the villain which we have been believing him, it seems a strange course that he should make such a venture as that. I wonder whether it was made in earnest, Aventayle; you are always thinking that everybody has a design upon your theatre."

"That's right—that's right," growled the manager.

"Because I try to protect myself a little, and never succeed, you taunt me with suspicion."

"My dear fellow, do not speak in that manner. I rather charged you with credulity."

"If you are speaking in the way of apology, I will quarrel with you outright. But listen to me. When I say that nothing new came out, just now, I ought to mention one thing, because the Frenchman laid a stress upon it, though I did not see much. I insisted on driving home a question which you will perhaps be angry with me for having asked, but there was such a confusion and contradiction in my mind that I could not help it."

"You spoke for the best, I know. What was the question?"

"I asked—I ventured to ask—don't be angry with me, Hawkesley."

"I will not, I swear to you."

"Well, then, I demanded to know whether the charges that had been made against—against *his* wife—had any foundation in truth."

"And what was the miscreant's answer?" said Hawkesley, turning very white.

"As you say, it can matter nothing what such a villain utters—"

"He did not dare to say that they were true?"

"He said that there was both truth and falsehood in the charges, Hawkesley, and at my risk of wounding or offending you, I have thought it my duty to tell you this."

"Offending is out of the question, and a wound

from him is impossible," said Hawkesley; "therefore, give yourself no further concern."

"But you do not tell me—to be sure, I have no right to expect you to do so."

"What I think of what he said? Yes, I will tell you. I believe, and every hour confirms me more and more in the conviction, that there is a mixture of truth and falsehood in the case. That is to say, that this wretch has acquired some real and genuine secret and has been using it, God knows how, but in furthering some devilish contrivance of his own. Were it not so, Aventayle, the very first moment that my sister-in-law comprehended the fact that a suspicion had come around her, would she not have indignantly trampled upon the lie? What the tangle may be into which he has entrapped that woman I cannot and dare not guess, but when the scoundrel said, in your presence, that he had not been using lies only, he said what I have made up my mind to hear for many a day."

"But you believe her—I am ashamed to ask you—"

"I believe her to be innocent and good, as God shall judge me. But whether some act of folly of her own, or some treachery that has twisted a natural action into a meaning and form away from its nature has helped this Adair to place her in her present position, it is now for us to discover."

"You will have to bribe the man, and bribe him high. I tell you that."

"That I expected."

"Of course, and I did not mention it as any new discovery, but for another reason."

"What's that, Aventayle?"

"Well, I suppose I may mention it. I have no idea what Mr. Lygon's means are, but perhaps it may be more convenient to a gentleman in Somerset House to pay a sum by instalments than in one lump; and if there is anything of that kind, I should feel hurt and wronged if you did not make me your banker."

"You are the best fellow in the world, and I shall make not the slightest hesitation in asking you for anything I may want. Did the fellow hint at terms?"

"No, he was much too haughty, and his master was obliged to say that he would take it on himself to negotiate. I suppose that they will go halves in whatever it is."

"Is not that a bit of good suspicion?"

"Well, one is a Frenchman, and the other is half a Frenchman."

"Arthur," said Hawkesley, entering the room in which his brother-in-law sat, "it is enough to tell you that we are at work, and I hope to good purpose. There, do not look so very disbelieving, because that tends to put one out of heart. Come out with me for a drive."

"I would rather remain here until you come to me and say that you have accomplished all that you intended to try, and that we return home by the next train," replied Lygon, calmly.

"You will not hear those words from me for many a long day," said Hawkesley. "Why not come out?"

"I am better here."

And Lygon so obstinately refused to accompany his brother-in-law in the excursion which the former suggested, that Hawkesley, only anxious to get rid of the time that must elapse until he could again meet M. —— at the bureau, wandered out alone.

"It is surely taking no step in the affair," said Hawkesley, "to go down to Versailles. I will not even go near the house. But I have a strange inclination to visit the neighbourhood, and if—"

It ended in his taking the next train for Versailles.

True to his compact with himself, Hawkesley did not turn down towards the avenue, but proceeded to the palace, and after walking slowly through a few of the rooms, that day nearly deserted, he went into the gardens.

It was as if destiny had impelled him thither, and the sensation which he experienced a few moments after entering was that which comes to us in a dream of the dead. We feel no surprise, we address them as those whom we expected and desired to meet, and we part without sorrow.

For, turning to one of the side walks, Charles Hawkesley beheld Laura coming towards him.

There was no thought of avoidance. They advanced to one another, as calmly as if they had been meeting in London after passing the previous

evening together, and they had shaken hands before the reaction came.

And then neither could speak for many minutes. Hawkesley made the attempt more than once, but found no word that seemed fit to commence their conversation. At length Laura, with an effort, broke the strange silence, and it was with a mother's question.

"When did you see the children?"

That was enough, and Charles Hawkesley, greatly relieved, hurried into a flood of details. Walter was well, and Freddy was well, and Clara was well, and they were at his house, and they enjoyed themselves as much as children could do—and Hawkesley, grateful for every memory that he could bring to bear, every tiny fact that he could think of, went on with such a budget of child-news as he could at another time have believed it impossible that he could have collected, and which Laura listened to with an eager ear, and a tearful eye.

"Thank God, they are well, and happy."

"They are well, indeed. Happier they shall be one of these days, and soon, dearest Laura," said Hawkesley.

They sat down on one of the benches in the shade and another silence followed, but this time it was Hawkesley's turn to break it.

"Arthur is with me."

"Here?" exclaimed Laura, starting.

"No; in Paris. He will not come hither—fear nothing, Laura."

"He *will* not!" repeated Laura.

"Nay, I mean that there is no reason for his coming—so far as he knows. There will be a reason, soon."

And they spoke long and earnestly, and hour after hour passed before they left the gardens.

CHAPTER IX.

"I SHALL make my market now," said Ernest Adair to himself, as he left the presence of his chief; "but they will cheat me if they can, and what is worse, my time is very short. If I had to deal with the Englishmen only, I should have no fear of my chances, but the bureau against Adair is heavy odds. The other day I had the re-assuring consolation that I had nothing to lose, but now I am encumbered by the weight of my possible good fortune. However, we must play calmly. No Cognac, now, M. Adair, moral or fluid. We must talk to the excellent Silvain. Let me see—our very last parting was not exactly an affectionate one—he nearly threw me into the street, and I assured him, in return, that I should certainly be his death. His cue, as *we actors* say, is, 'shall certainly kill you.' What will be his next speech? Let us hear."

Adair went down to Versailles, and proceeded to call at the shop of Silvain. The industrious little man was, as usual, behind his counter, and the door of the inner room was open, and there were no signs of one whom Ernest had civilly designated, as she came to his mind on his way, as that snarling she-dragon.

"I could draw her teeth, if she were worth it," he had muttered; "but it is a nobler revenge to leave them for the affliction of my friend Silvain. Besides, I am going to be respectable and virtuous, and to have no evil passions for the future. I wish I had thought of buying her a prayer-book, as a valedictory present."

Silvain coloured highly as Ernest entered the shop, and the perfumer hastily summoned his recollections and his courage, in order to be able to conduct himself with dignity.

"Silvain," said Ernest, "you are surprised to see me."

"A tradesman's house is open to all the world," replied Silvain, calmly.

"A fair hint," laughed Adair, pleasantly. "Well, that I may not encroach upon your time without recompensing you, let me have a case of your best toilette vinegar. I am going to England, and it will be acceptable to friends there."

Without a word, Silvain took out from a closet the required article, carefully enveloped it in paper, and handed it to his customer. Adair put down a Napoleon and duly counted the change that was given him.

"I think you might charge me wholesale price, Silvain," he said, again laughing; "but we will not haggle over trifles."

"I have charged the regular price, Monsieur," replied the other, in a business tone.

"Very well; I am not complaining. But when a

customer makes a purchase, it is a courtesy of commerce to afford him any little information he may desire. I am entitled to claim that courtesy, M. Silvain."

"What do you wish to ask, Monsieur?"

"You have been for some time a resident in Versailles, I believe?" said Adair, speaking as to a person whom he had never seen before. "You probably know the house of Mr. Urquhart, a Scotch gentleman, connected with railways, I believe?"

"Mr. Urquhart has left Versailles, and shut up his house."

"That fact had reached me. But it is as to the house itself that I would inquire. Is it to be let?"

"I do not know. There is a board affixed to the front, and that will probably answer the question."

"Is it possible that you are unacquainted with the announcement made by that document?"

"I attend to my own business."

"The business of a tradesman who intends to succeed in this world, Silvain, is to be able to oblige his customers. I know that you will pardon my pointing out this fact to you, because, though we may have occasionally misunderstood one another, you cannot fail to be aware of my interest in you."

Silvain made no answer, but busied himself with some of the duties of the shop.

"Can I execute any business in England for you? I am not likely ever to return to France. It is apart from your usual politeness to look pleased at that statement, my dear Silvain—but no matter. I shall be happy to be of any use to you. Or will Mademoiselle Henderson—she is still Mademoiselle, I presume—will she favour me with any commission in her native country?"

"We will not trouble you, Monsieur."

"Almost my earliest visit will be to Mademoiselle's birthplace. At least I shall have the pleasure of mentioning her improved prospects, and of congratulating her friends on her prosperous marriage."

Silvain suppressed all sign of anger, except a certain compression of the lip, and he still remained silent.

"Pray," said Adair, "do not leave me to infer from that dogged silence that anything has arisen to prevent the marriage. It will be sad news for the parents of Matilde."

"Say nothing small or great about her or me, Monsieur," hissed Silvain, "or it may be the worse for you; and if you have no more business with me, go away."

"That is really anything but the way to conciliate a customer, Silvain, and I have by no means worked out the amount of talk that is due to me on my vinegar. If you wish to be rid of me, you will answer my very harmless questions. Is Mr. Urquhart's house to let?"

"Yes. I know no more, but the *affiche* will furnish other information."

"But if the house is to be let it must be shown. Who is in the house to show it? Is that duty deputed to Mademoiselle?—no one could discharge it better."

"The house is entirely empty."

"Good," said Ernest Adair to himself. "Well, Silvain, wish me *bon voyage*."

"I am no hypocrite, Monsieur Adair, and I do not pretend to forget that the last time you were in this shop, you added to a brutal outrage a brutal threat. I hoped not to see you again. I hope never to see you again."

"And that is the charitable state of mind in which a perfumer who calls himself a Christian looks forward to partaking of the sacrament of matrimony. I counsel you to have some serious conversation with your confessor, Silvain. But come, old friend, this sort of thing is folly between us. You have been taught to hate me, and I do not complain of your yielding to your teachers, especially as some little personal matters of our own have not helped to cement our friendship. But do not bear malice. I am going away, and you never will see me again, unless you prosper as you deserve to do, and come over and set up a fashionable shop in Piccadilly, and cheat us stupid islanders with hair-oil perfumed upon scientific and philosophical principles, and lard translated into the marrow of birds of Paradise. I shall see you through an acre

of plate-glass, or never again. So forget that, in trying to help myself in sad difficulties, I have caused annoyances to you; forgive me, shake hands, and say adieu."

And Silvain, whether his naturally good little heart was touched by the frank and half-suppliant tone of Ernest, or whether the vision of English glories had for the moment clouded his mental vision, looked sentimental, and held out his hand to meet that of Adair.

But, as their hands met, Mary Henderson entered the shop, and Silvain, reddening intensely, drew back.

"There is no need for any such ceremony, Monsieur," he said, but, it must be owned, somewhat awkwardly. "Will you take your parcel?" he added, holding it out, eager to show that he possessed that excuse for having held any conference with Ernest. Henderson's eye told him, however, that she was not deceived for a second, and that he had much to hear upon the subject at a convenient season.

Ernest, who caught the reflection of her face in a glass opposite, turned round, and instantly said,

"I am taking leave of Silvain for ever, Mademoiselle, and I am rejoiced that you have arrived to witness our parting. He has forgiven me all that has passed, and was about to join hands with me in amity. I am sure that you will not be less forgiving, the rather that you have more to forgive, and women are so much more generous than we are. I am going to England."

"Not yet, Mr. Adair," said Henderson, quietly.

"Why, not yet, that is to say, not to-day, and perhaps not to-morrow, but certainly before the week is out."

"It may be so," said Henderson.

"Nay," said Adair, smiling, "we men are sometimes thought ready to break our promises when we undertake to return to you, but when we say that we are going away, I believe that we are generally to be trusted."

"I should like to speak a few words to you, Mr. Adair," said the girl, coldly, and with a business-like air.

"Will you walk into the room?" said Silvain, eager to do anything towards softening the advent of his approaching adversity.

"No," replied Mary Henderson, turning from him. "Will you walk with me a little way, Mr. Adair.

She left the shop, and Ernest Adair, as he followed, could not resist the temptation to kiss his hand, with an elaborate look of affection, towards Silvain, and went out with his hand upon his heart in sign that the latter was overflowing with gratitude for his friend's concession. The answering look was not of the same kind, but it was lost upon Adair, who hastened after Henderson.

"Are you afraid to be seen?" she asked abruptly.

"There are some eyes, certainly," he replied, "which I would rather avoid."

"I suppose so. This way, then."

Henderson led the way through three or four small obscure streets, and finally into a house—if it merited the name—of the poorest order. The shutter was closed, but the door, which was on the latch, opened to the girl's hand, and they stood in a low mean room, denuded of all furniture save an old broken wooden chair which it had not seemed worth the while of the outgoing tenant to take with him. The walls were dingy with dirt, and with the gloom of the place; and, as they went in, a starved cat rushed out, scared from her retreat.

"What a den!" said Ernest, pushing open a single square window at the back of the room, and letting in a current of wholesome air.

"Yes," replied the girl. "Since the poor man who lived here was cut down from that hook"—and she pointed to a beam, whence projected a hook, round the shank of which a fragment of cord was still clinging—"people have not liked to come in."

"A foolish way to die," said Adair. "What induced him to die at all?"

"He risked everything that he had in the world in a lottery," said the girl, looking steadily at Ernest, "and the lottery gave him a blank, so he was left a disgraced beggar, and died."

"Silly fellow—he should have lived, and beggared somebody else," said Adair, with a defiant smile.

"We all think these things till our time comes," replied Henderson.

"True," said Adair, "and I am glad to find that you are so much more serious in your view of affairs than poor Silvain, who is very flippant. I have been obliged to remonstrate with him."

"Leave Silvain alone, and listen to me," said Henderson.

"Have I not accepted this delightful *rendezvous* for that purpose? Speak, Mademoiselle?"

"Why have you come to Versailles?"

"Is there anything wonderful in one's coming to such a place in this delightful weather? The château, erected by Louis, surnamed the Great, at an expense which impoverished France, is a monument of regal extravagance, and the chapel—"

"You ought to have felt every step you took here was on red-hot iron," said Henderson, indignantly.

"Perhaps every step was about as dangerous," said Adair, carelessly, "but then you know my tastes are eccentric."

"You are here on some new scheme of villany," said the girl, "for nothing else would have made you run such a risk."

"There is no risk that you can understand, girl," said Ernest, something haughtily, for he began to be impatient at the tone of his inferior; but let that be as it may. What is your business with me?"

"What is your business with Silvain?"

"Could I leave France for ever without a reconciliation with that dear friend? I am happy to say

that I have accomplished this—he makes allowances for what has seemed objectionable in my conduct, and we were about to shake hands for the third time when you arrived to witness our exchange of forgiveness."

"Why do you lie to me?" demanded Henderson, in a tone by no means so offensive as her speech. "I do not mean you any harm."

"That is a comforting assurance."

"If you think that I am quite unable to do you any," replied Henderson, "you may be right, but do not be too sure of it."

"I am a man of business, my dear, and my time is valuable. You do not seem to know how to come to the business you want to do. Let me put you into the groove. Mrs. Lygon has sent you after me. Now, what does Mrs. Lygon want?"

"As I shall be judged," said Henderson, earnestly, "that poor lady knows no more of your being in Versailles, or of me seeing you, than the babe unborn."

"Whose babe unborn? But one must not ask impertinent questions, Madame Silvain. Well, without believing a syllable of what you say, what next?"

"Mr. Adair, if you have not indeed sold yourself to the devil body and soul, if you ever hope to die in your bed, if you have any mercy in you for yourself or any one else in the world, can you not do something to make up for your wickedness, and open the way for that poor dear lady to go home to her children?"

"My dear girl, which way can be more open than the Northern Railway? And if it were not, it is to your late master, the engineer, not to me, that you should address yourself to open a railway line."

"I wonder that you dare mention his name," said she, in an under tone. "You are a mocking devil, Mr. Adair, but it will come home to you."

"You put yourself in a rage, Henderson, and people who are sent with other people's messages should never do that."

"I am sent with no message."

"Well, put it so, and say that you know Mrs. Lygon would be very much obliged to me if I would have the kindness to blot out the proofs of her character, would persuade Mr. Urquhart and her husband that she is a spotless person, and would restore her to home and happiness. And in return for these trifling favours, what do you think that Mrs. Lygon is inclined to offer me? Tell me, because I am not proud. No reasonable offer refused."

"Have you no repentance for all that you have done?"

"Not the least, so leave out all that kind of superfluous talk. Do you know that I was going to buy you a prayer-book for a present, but I am happy to find that you do not need one."

"What can Mrs. Lygon offer you, when you have driven her from her home, and left her without a friend in the world, Mr. Adair? Oh, do have some mercy upon her. For in your heart of hearts you

know that you have lied, and that she is cruelly and wickedly wronged."

"The friends whom she had—and they were good ones—do not think so, and the opinion of an impulsive lady's-maid may be valuable, but it is not convincing to her betters. So, as you do not appear to have much to say, except that Mrs. Lygon is an angel, and that I am the other thing, and as that sort of conversation is apt to be tiresome, I think I will wish you good-bye."

"Do not you go until I have done," said Henderson, very earnestly. Her manner throughout the whole interview had been divested of her ordinary petulance, and she had spoken with more self-restraint than might have seemed possible, her habitual impetuosity remembered.

"What next? Are you going to call up the ghost of the gentleman who went out of the world by way of this hook? I would rather hear *you*."

"For Heaven's sake do not speak so shockingly wicked, and in a place where the dead have been. Mr. Adair, I know that it is of no use for me to plead with you—the things that I have known of you ought to have taught me better than to try that—but I did hope that, thinking over the ruin you have brought to two ladies, and the sorrow and agony you have caused in their houses, might have softened your heart a little, and you might have shown one of them some mercy."

"You have said all this before, and I have answered you," said Adair, roughly.

"I beg your pardon, and I will say it no more. But if I were to ask you a question, would you answer it?"

"Most likely not. But try."

"What might you have been asking of Silvain? It is of no good saying that you made friends with him. I could see all that went on, but you kept on speaking to him, and he would hardly answer."

"What a vigilant watch we keep on our Silvain! And you are right, for he is worth watching. I will tell you all that passed, the rather that you will know every syllable in five minutes from your going back to him. I bought a packet of toilette vinegar of him, for which he charged me full price, so do not let him cheat you out of any perquisites; and I asked him whether Mr. Urquhart's house was to be let."

"Yes," said Henderson, eagerly.

"He replied that it was, and that it was empty."

"It is empty," said the girl, with a curious intonation.

"That was about all; and as you will perceive all that I was able to say was merely intended to draw him into conversation, which he was not much inclined for."

"You came to Versailles to know whether Mr. Urquhart's house was empty?" repeated Henderson.

"No, I tell you. What do I care whether it is empty or not? I am going to England, so certainly have no object in examining French houses; besides

that, out of all the houses in France, Mr. Urquhart's is the last in which I would live."

"Mr. Adair," said the girl, solemnly, "if you persevere in a plan which I believe has brought you to Versailles, I will put back your own words into your mouth, sir."

"How will you manage that feat, Henderson?"

"Pray don't laugh, sir—please, sir, in God's name, do not laugh. If you do what is in your mind, Mr. Urquhart's house will be the last in which you will live."

"What a very mysterious speech, Madame Silvain! Have you been reading any conjuring-books lately?"

But the laugh was not quite an easy one.

"I could make it much plainer if I chose, sir; but you have not deserved that I should do you any kindness. If you had met me in a different way, I would have said more, and been proud and glad to do it. But you will not show any mercy, and I have no call to say another word. The judgment will come, if it be God's will, and those who might have stayed it will remember when it is too late."

She waited for a moment, looked at him hard, and went out hastily.

"The she-dragon has turned melodramatic," said Ernest Adair, lighting a cigarette. "I must recollect the incident for Aventayle. '*The Dead Man's Hook; or, the Warning under the Beam,*'—it would finish an act capitally."

Yet the scoffer was not sorry to come out of the suicide's hut into the sunshine.

CHAPTER X.

From the cottage, Mary Henderson, taking a hare-like precaution lest Ernest Adair should follow her, made her way, something deviously, to the house in which Mrs. Lygon had her apartment. Admitted to Laura's room, the girl imparted a portion of the story that has been told in the preceding chapter, but said nothing of her having sought to plead with Adair, and simply took credit to herself for having endeavoured to discover the business on which he had come to Versailles. To her surprise Henderson found in Mrs. Lygon a cold and pre-occupied listener. For poor Laura's heart had been stirred to its depths by her interview with Hawkesley in the gardens, and when she had leisure to turn from the contemplation of her own fortunes, and from the revelations which her brother-in-law had made, her thoughts were away with her children. The hearing of and about them, the little narratives of their little joys and sorrows and troubles, the breath from child-land which had suddenly come around her, had re-awakened all the thousand strings that make music between the mother and the child, and Laura, saddened and thoughtful, only desired, until better times should come, to be left with that living music.

As for Silvain, when he found that instead of the storm which he had expected upon his weak head for the offence of his weak heart, his mistress waived all that was past, and condescendingly took him into counsel as to the future, his happiness was exuberant. That he coincided with her in every thought and word was matter of course, that he was prepared at a moment's notice to undertake any scheme that could be suggested to him was almost equally so. He was burning for an opportunity of proving that, though circumstances had for a moment seemed against him, he was loyal and true, and worthy of the love and esteem of his energetic English girl.

"Yet it must be done at once, Silvain, and what is to be done with the shop?"

The shop might go — Silvain was going to be needlessly energetic. At all events, the best part of the day was over, it was not a day for chance custom, the orders had been attended to, and he would close.

"We will never do this out of idleness, or for the sake of a holiday, Silvain; but as there is a good thing to be done, that is to say, to be tried, we will hope that shutting up will not turn luck against us."

The shop *was* shut up, and Silvain and Matilde went their way on the errand which she had not dared to mention. It was one which required both secrecy and adroitness—which might end in nothing —but which also might materially affect the destiny

of those whom Henderson was so anxious to serve. So they went about the errand with speed and with resolution.

An hour later in the day, Silvain contrived to throw himself in the way of Ernest Adair, whom he had succeeded in tracing. Adair was restless, now entering a little inn, taking some slight and perfectly unintoxicating refreshment, glancing over a journal, and coming away—now wandering about the smaller streets of Versailles, avoiding the principal thoroughfares—now walking some little distance into the country, and suddenly turning backwards towards the town. It was upon one of the outlying roads that Silvain encountered him.

This time the Frenchman gave him his hand, unsolicited, but looked round, as if to see that no one observed the act.

"I am glad to have met you, M. Adair," said Silvain. "You would understand why I refused your hand in the shop. You comprehend that when one's happiness is in the keeping of another person, one has to make numerous sacrifices. And not to disguise from you what you well know, you are certainly hated in that quarter."

"Well, I must hope that time will efface the hatred, and that the advocacy of a friend will assist time. I bear no malice, and I hope that you will be very happy. You were not jealous at Mademoiselle's selecting me for a *tête-à-tête*. Jealous—happy man—he shrugs his shoulders, knowing that

the heart of Matilde is a rock of Gibraltar for all but himself."

"And you are really going to England?"

"I am indeed, and immediately. I will make you a confidence, though you don't deserve it for charging me full price for my vinegar. I am going to be an actor."

"No man is better calculated to make a great success, and we shall read of it in the journals. I congratulate the English. They will have an actor at last."

"And so Matilde hates me, truly, thoroughly, and as a woman hates—that is to say, if she had to describe me in a bill, she would insist on saying that I was short, fat, and ugly, stammered and stuttered, spoke bad French, and had generally a hang-dog appearance. Do you suppose I should think the worse of her for *that?* Not at all. Lying! It would not be lying, it would be truth, as presented to the female organisation, regarding a man who was distasteful. They praise in the same manner, bless you! The most hideous lout of a soldier, with the profile of a sole and the croak of a raven, becomes a noble-voiced hero to Jeannette, as soon as he has made his way to her heart. Do you consider them responsible beings? I do not. So, come, own that Matilde, having failed in getting me to come to terms, is availing herself of the hold our friendship gives you over me, and has bid you use your influence."

"It is not so," said Silvain; but it was said in

a way which was intended to confirm Adair in the conviction that a new ambassador was being tried.

"You would not have shaken hands with me unless you had her leave to do so, Silvain, and you were sent to find me out."

"If it were so, would my attempt be utterly fruitless?"

"Why, I would, as you know, sooner please you than anybody else, because I like you, and because I owe you a sort of atonement. But what can be said between us, my dear Silvain? You are a friend, but you are also a man of business, and a sound, clear-headed fellow. Well, I am asked to run a very great risk, do a very great service, and all for nothing. Your Matilde says that I am a devil, and backs up that intolerable proposition by desiring me to show mercy gratis. Why, you, who charge a friend retail price for toilette vinegar, must see that this is not the way to set to work. Take a cigarette."

"I have no better bargain to propose to you, my dear Adair," said Silvain. "Let us go into the Silver Deer, and refresh ourselves."

"Not now, Silvain. I take but little, and I am desirous to keep my head as cool as I can. No more card-parties and brandy, like that when you let loose the wild beast, Haureau, upon me, traitor."

"Do not say so. I had no idea of his character. I thought that he was a smuggler, and probably an

escaped convict, but I did not suppose him to be a bad fellow. And you certainly chastised him."

"I wish the cursed dagger had flown to shivers as I pulled it out. It was to your friend, and your brandy, and that blow, that Matilde may lay all the suffering which has come upon her ladies. I was driven to bay in the police-cell, and the fatal revelation was made. Does Matilde consider you the author of all these catastrophes?"

"No," said Silvain, in his turn disconcerted. The subject had never presented itself to him in this way.

"It appears to me that her hatred concentrates itself upon the wrong person. It is you, M. Silvain, you perceive, who are the real criminal."

"That is not the way to speak of it."

"Not quite. I waive the invitation to me, and the brandy. But when you engage a notorious ruffian, in the pay of the police (Don't tell me that you did not know that, my dearest Silvain, because I could call him to contradict you); and when you set that man upon me, and place me in such a position that, in defence against him, I use my knife, and in defence against consequences I use my information, who is the real enemy of Mrs. Urquhart and Mrs. Lygon? I must have this view of the case set clearly before Matilde, and before Mrs. Lygon herself, in whom you have pretended to take an interest."

"Your tongue has not gained in gentleness since

we last met," said Silvain, who by no means liked the tone which the dialogue was taking.

"The man who disguises truth from a friend is incapable of a true friendship," said Ernest Adair. "Cherish that sentiment, Silvain, for though I shall be far away, you will be sure to have other true friends, especially as you are going to keep a handsome wife."

"But come and drink with me, as we are about to part," said Silvain.

"To repeat your own words, there is no need of that ceremony, M. Silvain. I shall preserve the recollection of your regard, which I wish you would crown by a little frankness."

"What do you wish me to say?"

"Tell me, though I shall know it without your aid, what object Mademoiselle Matilde proposes to herself in permitting you to associate with me all this time, to smoke with me, and to offer to drink with me? Had you not her leave and licence for each act, my dear Silvain, I should have had far less of your delightful society. Come, tell me, and I may reward you by sending you back to her with good news."

"I wish that I had anything to tell you, then," said Silvain, "but, unhappily, I can make you no further answer."

"Then I will tell you, M. Silvain; but you must not be frantic at finding that a stranger is deeper in the confidence and secresy of your intended wife than you yourself are. Matilde has been to Mrs.

Lygon, to inform her that I am in Versailles, and you are sent to keep me in conversation until a telegraphic message can be forwarded to Paris. I was injudicious enough to admit to Matilde that there were persons whom I did not desire to see, and if the wires do their work, some of those persons will soon be here. Now, let us go and drink at the Silver Deer."

"You are wrong, indeed you are wrong, M. Adair. There has been no thought of sending any message to Paris: and if I understand Matilde aright, she would have served you, if you had permitted it."

"Permitted it, my dear Silvain, by throwing up a game on which my future fortune is set! There, I am frank with *you*. And now, as I have shown you my cards, we need say no more; and as you declare that you have no object in detaining me, and I have business to attend to, we will part here, just out of sight of the town. Of course you will watch me, in order to report to Matilde, and I will facilitate your duties by informing you that I am going down to the avenue, to read from the board in front of Mr. Urquhart's house the name of the person who has charge of letting it, and any other particulars. And when I have copied this, for I wish for a copy of it for a reason of my own, I shall return to my own little inn, where I shall remain until eight o'clock, as I expect a visitor. After eight, you must do your spying for yourself."

"I wish you farewell, M. Adair," said Silvain, less angrily than the offensive speech and tone

seemed to render natural in his reply. "I repeat that you wrong both Matilde and myself; but it is useless for me to say what you have resolved not to believe. Should you go to England, I wish you the success you deserve. Should you be delayed by any casualty, unforeseen by yourself, it will be for you to remember that, in your scorn of two persons in humble position, you rejected terms that might have prevented that casualty. I wish you farewell, M. Ernest Adair."

Adair had listened with gravity to this speech; but at its close he raised his hat, and, as Silvain walked away, made him a deep bow of mock respect.

Nevertheless, Silvain did watch him for some time; did see him make his way towards the avenue; and did follow him far enough to perceive that Adair stood before the house of Urquhart, and was apparently transcribing the contents of the *affiche* into his pocket-book. Silvain made no pretext of concealing himself, and Ernest, looking back, saw him standing at the end of the road, and again raised his hat. Silvain turned away, and departed.

What Silvain did not see took place twenty minutes later. A man had adroitly scaled the wall of the garden in the rear of the deserted house, and had sprung down upon one of the beds. Then, after several cautious glances around, to assure himself that he was not watched in that well-wooded garden, the stranger approached the house, and coming up to a window, with some exertion forced open an

outside Venetian blind. It was the back window of the ground-floor room in which Laura had been concealed from Urquhart.

He forced the blind, threw up the English sash, and mounted on the sill. Ernest Adair was about to descend into the room, when he looked round for a moment. But he saw no one.

Yet another man was in the garden, and was watching him.

This was Robert Urquhart.

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. HAWKESLEY TO HER HUSBAND.

"MY DEAREST CHARLES,

* * * * *

All which you know without my telling it.

"And now for serious matters. Be sure that you read this letter when you are by yourself, and be quite sure that you make out every word in it before you destroy it,—not exactly an unnecessary request, as your remembrance will tell you.

"Poor Bertha has been exceedingly ill, and is so still, although Dr. Solmes considers that there is no immediate danger. But the fever has only excited her frightfully, and has not made her light-headed, as I expected it would do. She insists upon talking, and the irritation into which she is thrown by being desired to be silent is perhaps more dangerous than the permitting her to speak. If she is left alone, she at once rings the bell so violently that the whole house is alarmed, and I dare not tie the rope up out of her way, or, feeble as she is, I believe that she would crawl out of her room, and do herself some fearful mischief. If it were not for this state of things, I should have refused to hear anything from her upon the terrible subject; but what can I do? And it is better that

she should pour out her incoherent confidences to me than to any one else. I write in her room, interrupted by her incessantly, and therefore you must do your best to make out my meaning, and I write as fast as I can at the risk of saying the same thing over again; but you are used to that in me.

"My dearest Charles, I know not how—and the more I consider it the less I know how—to separate the truth from the idle talk which flows from Bertha's lips hour after hour. Such a mixture of the most solemn and the most frivolous things I never heard, and it is very difficult to believe her in the full possession of her senses. Yet she is so minutely accurate about small matters, and recollects the tiniest point about dress, or ornament, or any sight she has seen, or any stranger she has met, that it is a hard struggle to believe that when she breaks out into revelations that I cannot even hint at, she is inventing or wandering. Is there any form of mental disease in which the sufferer's mind cannot grasp anything beyond trifles? While I write the words, they recall a curious speech you yourself once made, in which you said that perhaps when we get into the next world we should discover that we had never had the resolution really to open our eyes at all in this, and so had never seen the angels and ghosts all round us, but only felt our way along. Bertha seems never to have looked out firmly upon life, but to have contented herself with what was quite close to her, just as baby, when you sat her down for the first time by the sea, and

you expected her to be astonished and delighted with the waves, pulled her little hat over her eyes and filled her lap with the stones, and you are disappointed. My dear Charles, bear with my scribbling. I feel that I try to keep away from a painful theme.

"I cannot arrive at a decision. But you know this already, because you know my ways, and that you would have had it in the very first line of my letter if I had been certain. I have gone over and over everything that Bertha has said and keeps on saying, and have put it in all shapes and forms, and yet I cannot weave it all into one connected story. That E. A. is the most fearfully wicked man who ever lived there cannot be a shadow of a doubt, and that poor Bertha is all that we have been forced to believe, I wish I could say was in the least degree made doubtful. I cannot write about this, and I need not. But I cannot, from all that she has said, and from all that I can bring out of it when she allows me time to think for myself—I cannot make out the true character of R. U.

"No one could esteem him so highly as you did, and I am sure that I was always ready to accept your estimate of him, and to suppose that you understood him better than a woman could do. And do not think that any representations of Bertha's would have weight with me against your judgment, or that I am unconsciously allowing an erring wife to make me listen to any extenuations which she may try to find in the character of her

husband. It is not from anything that she says against him (and it is very little indeed that I ever permit her to say upon the subject), that a strange impression is fixing itself into my mind. If I am to believe what she says—I mean, dear, the actual facts which she tells—I must say, and please forgive me if I put the case too abruptly against your friend, that—I scarcely like to write it—but if R. had desired to make known all about E. A. very much sooner, *the proofs were within his reach.*

"Reading over these last lines, and having broken off to attend to my patient, I am not satisfied with them; and you must let me put what I mean in plainer words. Did not R. know of all that had taken place long before he chose to make others aware that it had come to his knowledge? You told me what he had said to poor Arthur when sending him home. Charles, if R. were *not* then in the dark as to his own household misery!

"You will reject this thought at the first reading; but do you think that I would have put it on paper if I could have justified to myself the not writing it to you? Because it is a very shocking thought, and because it is far more terrible when we come to connect it with what has happened since. Please to think over all this as calmly as you would do, if you were sitting by my side, which I wish more than I can tell you that you were, at such a time. I know your faith in R. U., and God knows that I would be the last to try to shake it; but if he is your friend, remember that Laura is my sister, and

let me speak as freely for her as you would do for him.

"You have thought over it, dearest, and in spite of my assurance that Bertha, ill as she is now, and childish as she is at the best of times, is perfectly capable of bearing witness to facts, you have come to the conclusion that a woman has allowed herself to be talked into a confused belief by another woman who has a confused mind, and who is not to be trusted. No, dear Charles, you have not. You have, man-like, taken that view first, and then you have thought of me as not quite like all the easy and credulous women whom you have known, and you have come round to the conclusion that your wife would not write as she has done unless she had something to say which was worth your serious attention. I know that you are giving me fair play, dearest—what a word? but I write as fast as I could speak, and I have picked no words at all. You are shocked and grieved, and grieved too, dear one, am I that I cannot throw my arms round you while I am wounding you, as I feel I am doing. But it is the truth, Charles. I am convinced that it is the truth.

"Do not think that I have rushed on hastily. When I could no longer blind myself to the conviction that R. had chosen, *for his own reasons*, to retain in his own bosom his knowledge of the terrible truth, I fought against all the repugnance which such a thought calls up in a woman's nature, and I tried with all my might to find excuses for

his conduct. The natural thought of course was that he might say he had insufficient evidence, and that it was not for him to act until he had more, and that in the meantime he should defeat his own purpose by causing suspicion that he had discovered anything. That might be a humiliating position for a man—and there are men who would have died sooner than have borne it—but it might be in his stern nature to bear all things until the day of retribution should come. I clung to that view, Charles, I am sure for your sake more than because I could feel that it was right, but *it is not true.* You must take my word for what I must not write, but *it is not true.*

"Then, dearest Charles, what becomes of all that follows? If it should be made clear to you that R. was acting this unmanly and treacherous part, if you come to the belief that while he was preaching to Arthur of love, and confidence, and domestic happiness, he was nursing up the materials of vengeance, what is to be said of his conduct as regards Laura? Are we to believe in one single word of his statements? He writes that evidence has been placed in his hands, and upon that evidence Arthur is to give himself up to a misery that will break his heart, and you, dearest, are silent, or only speak to confess that if R. is convinced, hope is over—and then it is our turn to make discoveries, and we learn that let him pretend to have what new proofs he may, he had long before had evidence that should have parted him and Bertha for ever.

Can we continue to place any faith—the least faith in a man who has been living and acting what I call treachery, put what worldly name you like upon it? I am certain, as I write these lines, that my husband, as he reads them, will feel that we have been cruelly imposed upon. And for you to know of a wrong, Charles, is to hasten to do justice, and I love you for that and for all the rest.

"Again I am interrupted, and Bertha asks, in a querulous voice, whether I am setting down things against her, and wishes that she was dead. Dr. Solmes also has come, and will not speak out upon the case, but sees no alteration for the worse, and wishes that she would sleep. Yet he appears to hesitate as to giving her any strong narcotic. I think that he is puzzled, and yet he is too honest a man to be afraid to say so, and he would desire another opinion if he thought that it would be useful. But if there is no change to-morrow, I will take upon myself to speak plainly.

"Your letter was short, but very welcome. I do not ask you to write me long letters, but let me have a line every day—I am breaking off from what I most wanted to say. It is this. Let me beg of you not to be guided by any of the considerations which men think so much of, and, whether you have the sanction of Arthur or not, do you find out Laura and see her. In one minute from the time you and Laura meet, you will know all. I would give thousands to meet her face to face for one minute. Pray, Charles, my own husband, give way

to me in this, and let R. say what he may, or let A. urge that it is not for you to forestall him, do you think of me and my happiness, and go away and see Laura. And write me word that you have done so. Do this, dearest. I have more to say to you than I could get into my letter, but if you will only read carefully what I have scribbled so carelessly, I shall be sure that you understand me. I do not believe that R. is a man who should be called the friend of an honourable man; and if you are inclined to be angry with me for writing so harshly, do not be angry until I have told you all that I have to say.

"There will be little rest for me until you return, but I am quite well, and so are the children. You need not be told what they would say, bless them, if they knew that I was writing to papa.

"Ever your own,

"BEATRICE."

In reference to this letter it is only necessary to say that the injunction of Mrs. Hawkesley had been obeyed, by anticipation, through the means of Charles Hawkesley's accidental meeting with Mrs. Lygon in the gardens, and that his reply, in which that interview was described, crossed his wife's letter. Hawkesley's communication need not be given, but it should be said that it was brief, that he had touched very slightly upon anything that had occurred in Paris, but had sought to prepare his wife to be told that there was no hope of the reunion of Laura and her husband.

CHAPTER XII.

Mr. Aventayle left the Hotel Mirabeau, and with no great accession of good spirits wandered forth into Paris.

"Those fellows make me d—d melancholy," said the kindly-natured manager, "and while they are all engaged upon business of that infernal kind, I swear I have no heart to go grinning at vaudevilles, as I ought to do. Just like me, always letting other folks' affairs interfere with my own."

Nevertheless he generally managed to attend to his own indifferently well; and it is satisfactory to know that the warm-hearted, open-handed man was a great deal more prosperous than he would allow, even in the confessional set up by the commissioners of income tax.

As he went lounging slowly along with a comprehensive grumble at the universe, he put his hand into his waistcoat pocket, and grumbled once more —this time at a concentrated grievance. He had scratched his hand with a stiff card, which he immediately drew out, and perceived that it was that which M. Wolowski had given him when they separated in front of the café on the Boulevard.

"He must be a snob," said the incensed manager "to use thick cards like that, when decent French-

men carry none much thicker than paper. But he asked me to go and call on him, if we did not see our way to doing any good without him. I see none, and I am rather thrown over than not by that swell at the bureau. I swear I'll go and talk to the Pole. I suppose I have a right to talk to a Pole if I like. I shall not do any good, I dare say; but it is something to do no harm on an afternoon in Paris."

So Mr. Aventayle made out the obscure house to which the card invited him, was immediately admitted, and found himself in the room where Ernest Adair had been finally discomfited by the production of the original manuscript from which he had copied the play sent to Aventayle. While he waited, a pretty girl came into the room, with apparent unconsciousness that any one was there.

"I cannot find him, papa Wolowski," she said, innocently, and the next moment was all surprise and apology to the stranger.

Aventayle immediately projected his mind into his theatre, and gazed at Madelon with a thought as to how she would make up, and how well that coquettish costume and neat ancle would look behind the foot-lights. Then he took note of the coquettish costume, and resolved that a young lady who formed part of his company, and who had quite as neat an ancle as Madelon, should appear in that garb, at the earliest opportunity. For Mr. Aventayle seldom lost a chance of catering for the edification of the public.

"I cannot flatter myself with the hope that you came to look for me, Mademoiselle," said the polite manager.

It would not have been flattery, however. For papa Wolowski, always ready to afford his pet any innocent gratification, had told her to go up and look at the celebrated London actor.

Of course she had come to speak to M. Wolowski, who had been there a moment before, and had sent her on a message.

"M. Wolowski is happy to be served by such charming messengers."

"Oh, Monsieur!"

The intellectual conversation was speedily interrupted by the advent of M. Wolowski himself; and Madelon departed, forgetting that she had a message to deliver to him—a point which Mr. Aventayle noticed—and then recollected that he was fifty, which thought did not comfort him so much as his next recollection, that he was a celebrity.

"Are you to be complimented as the real papa of that pretty young person, M. Wolowski, or was the term only one of friendship?"

"I hardly know," said M. Wolowski, quaintly. "But as so distinguished a connoisseur allows that she is pretty, we will give her the benefit of the doubt."

"I wish I had a sketch of her dress—it is charming."

"You shall have one before you leave Paris, if you are good enough to think it worth accepting.

A young friend of hers has skill with the pencil, and you will make two persons happy by commanding the sitting."

"He is happy already."

"Thanks, in Madelon's name. And so, Mr. Aventayle, you have done me the favour to accept my invitation to call."

"Well, yes, but really—"

"I am your debtor for that. And I perceive, by your manner, that you hardly know what you have come for, or in what way you would like to avail yourself of my humble services."

"You really say what I meant to say. But since I saw you, I have heard a great many strange things, and I have been told—"

"If I can save you any trouble, I will. I know I can save you a little by informing you that I am aware of all that has passed between you and your friend, and M. ——, at the bureau, and of a good deal more."

"Then you know of an appointment that has been made for to-morrow?"

"For M. Ernest Adair to meet other parties, and disclose certain secrets?"

"Yes, you are evidently in M. ——'s confidence."

"I might have heard of the appointment from other sources, but to be frank with you, I have the honour you mention."

"Well, M. Adair is your friend, and therefore I do not expect that you will tell me anything that he would not wish you to tell."

"That, my dear Mr. Aventayle, is the most charmingly original view of friendship. I have been unlucky enough to find that it is one's friends who are always the most ready with objectionable revelations about one, things that one's enemies would never have been able to pick up without such affectionate assistance."

"True enough," grumbled the manager. "But as you are his agent and so on, I speak to you as acting in his interest. I have no finesse about me, and I must go straight to the point, or stop at home."

"No reticence, eh?" laughed the Pole.

The manager looked at him with a humorous expression.

"Oh, if you were not under the table, you know all about it," he said. "Yes, I hate reticence, though I don't know exactly what it is. I dare say that I am showing none, and I want to show none. I wish to say to you, in the first place, that I do not believe your friend, M. Ernest Adair, will reveal any secrets at that meeting to-morrow."

"Nor do I," replied the Pole, calmly.

"There, then," said Mr. Aventayle, angrily. "Just as I supposed. Then we are all to be made fools of once more, and M. —— was merely humbugging."

"No one can accuse you of not making yourself understood, my dear Mr. Aventayle," said Wolowski, smiling. "But you jump to conclusions with an agility that does honour to your mental muscles."

"I did not know I had any. However, muscles or cockles, we are to be done again."

"Let us accuse nobody unjustly. I think that it is more than probable that my friend, M. Adair, may have to be absent from the meeting to-morrow, and of course, if he cannot attend, he can make no revelation."

"But he ought to be present."

"I think that if he should attend, and should reveal any of the secrets which will then be in his possession, he will be about the most unwelcome guest that ever joined a party."

"What do you mean, M. Wolowski?"

"As a theatrical artist, Mr. Aventayle, it may have fallen to your lot to play *Don Giovanni*, and to invite the statue to supper."

"No, but I have often played *Leporello*. But what has that to do with it?"

"*Leporello's* experiences will equally serve to explain my meaning. When the statue of the dead man comes into the room, what did you do as *Leporello?*"

"I got under the table, of course, enacting the awfullest funk in the world."

"Well, I think," said the Pole, with the most imperturbable calmness, "that to-morrow, in the event of M. Ernest Adair appearing at the meeting, your friends will have the opportunity of comparing the real and the artistic expression of terror."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"I think that M. Adair will be killed to-night.'

"Killed!"

"I think so. I have very good reason to think so. And in that case, I suppose that you will not be so happy to see him at one to-morrow."

"Good God, man!" exclaimed Aventayle, "don't talk of murder in that cold-blooded way!—bah!—you are playing a bit of farce, and, like an old actor, I am sure to be taken in. It is a bad compliment to you, though," he added, "that I was serious for an instant, but I have heard such a quantity of extraordinary things, that I can't feel quite regularly, and as one ought to do. Killed! Not bad."

"At any risk of shocking or paining you," said the Pole, with gravity, "I must prevent you from treating the subject in a way which you would regret. I spoke in all seriousness."

"What are you telling me?"

"M. Adair has gone upon a mission, in connection with the appointment of to-morrow, and it is almost impossible that he should return alive."

"But this is horrible," said Aventayle, starting up. "Who sent him, where is he gone, why is he not protected?"

"He goes of his own free will."

"But—but—what is the sort of danger?"

"You chose to give it a name just now, and, looking at it in an English point of view, I do not know that the name does not suit. We give it a milder name in France. You called it murder."

"And you sit there, and say this as if you were speaking of a trifle!"

"No good purpose would be served by my exciting myself, Mr. Aventayle. I have nothing to do with the business, or the result. I have tried to serve M. Adair, at very considerable loss of reputation to myself, but he will not let himself be served on my terms. He has now chosen, with a kind of dogged impulsiveness, to execute an errand which might have been safely performed by any other person, but which was probable death to him. Circumstances now enable me to say that it is all but certain death to him. He has chosen to throw himself into the power of the deadliest enemy he has in the world, and it happens that the enemy knows the fact. I do not expect to see M. Adair again, unless, as very intimate with him, I should be judicially invited to identify his body."

"I cannot talk to you, you make my blood run cold," said Aventayle, looking very white, and glancing at the door. "Yet tell me. You mean that this poor wretch has gone to meet Mr. Urquhart?"

"His errand was to Mr. Urquhart's house, and there Mr. Urquhart will find him. More probably has now found him. Do you know the man?"

"Scarcely."

"He is a giant, in whose hands Adair will be like a child; and he is a giant maddened by a sense of the worst wrong."

"And *we* have sent the unfortunate creature on this fearful errand," said Aventayle.

"No," said Wolowski; "I was prepared to hear you say that. If you consider it a crime to have

placed a bad man in the way of punishment, you are acquitted. It was proposed to him that he should give up his secret, and trust to the honour of those who would have acted fairly by him. But he refused to do so, supposing that he should be able to make better terms with the Englishmen than with the bureau. It is his own avarice that has killed him."

"Is it too late to stop him? Surely something can be done?" said the agitated manager. "It is downright wicked to sit here and speak of a poor wretch being killed. I will do something, at all events."

"I assure you that it is too late," said the Pole. "Whatever was to be done has been done long ere this. Go to Versailles as fast as steam can carry you, but it will be idle."

"I will try, though," said Aventayle, with an oath which it may be hoped is not set down against him. "I am in some sort a party to this wickedness, and it shall not be on my conscience." And he dashed from the apartment.

"A theatrical manager with a conscience!" said the Pole, thoughtfully, as he rose to close the door which Aventayle had left open. "What new *lusus naturæ* may we look for? They will hurry off to Versailles," he added, "he and the others, and they will be too late. There was no help for it. Adair had finally taken the bit between his teeth, and there was nothing to do but to let him dash himself against the next wall. As for his secret, doubtless M—— has taken care of that, and will be some ten thousand

francs the richer thereby. Poor Adair! It is a pity that he had not more self-command, and less greediness. I always cautioned him against gambling, at which he was ever being ruined, and I hoped that he was cured. Now he gambles again upon a frightful scale, and against players who are ten times stronger than he is, and he is utterly lost. I am sorry for him —really sorry. Chantal has far more steadiness, but not his genius. *Ite, missa est.*"

CHAPTER XIII.

But Hawkesley was not at the hotel when Aventayle once more hastened thither. Mr. Lygon was there; but upon him the manager felt an almost insuperable objection to break, for their acquaintance was slight, and the character of the communication which Aventayle had to make was one which made the subject especially unapproachable. Yet, what was to be done? While the manager hesitated, Lygon, hearing a footstep in his brother-in-law's room, opened his own door.

"I thought that Charles had returned," said Arthur, retiring.

"A moment, Mr. Lygon, if you please. I had hoped to find him here; but I have missed him. You have no idea where he is to be found?"

"Not much. He just mentioned Versailles, but I can hardly say that I think he is gone there."

"Versailles! Let me say one word to you."

"By all means, Mr. Aventayle," said Arthur, closing the door.

"I scarcely know how to begin, Mr. Lygon; and yet minutes may be precious. I had better say at once, without stopping to apologise for knowing anything that concerns yourself, or any one else, that I have just learned that a frightful meeting is likely

to take place—may have taken place already—and that murder may be the issue."

"Some one we care about, or you would not be so agitated. Who is it, who?"

"Mr. Urquhart has gone down to Versailles to meet Ernest Adair."

"Stop," said Arthur Lygon, his eyes flashing, but his voice subdued by a painful effort until it was almost calmer than ordinary. "How do you know this?"

"From a man who cannot be mistaken—who knows all—who speaks of Ernest Adair as a dead man."

"As a dead man," repeated Arthur Lygon. "That is a strange way to speak of him," he added, very slowly, the words evidently meaning nothing less than what was in the speaker's mind. "So Urquhart has gone down to meet him," he said after a pause. "You are sure that it is Urquhart?"

"Quite sure. I came to tell Hawkesley."

"It is much more proper that you should tell me," said Arthur, with extraordinary calmness.

"More proper?"

"Certainly, and I am obliged to you for doing so. I wonder whether Hawkesley was aware of this, and whether that knowledge took him to Versailles?"

"No, he could not be."

"You speak positively. I dare say that you are right. However, if he has gone there, it is all very

well. He will let me know what is to be done next."

"I fear that I have not made you understand me."

"Perfectly. Urquhart is gone to Versailles to meet Adair."

"To kill him, sir. He will kill him."

"He has a right to do so," replied Arthur Lygon, calmly as before. "At least, for reasons which we need not enter upon, he has the first right to make the attempt. If he foregoes that right, or fails, it will then be a question as to any subsequent step. But Hawkesley will inform me as to that. I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Aventayle."

And with a courteous gesture, Lygon left the room.

"That man is stunned," said Aventayle. "He is not responsible for his actions. I do not think that Charles Hawkesley ought to leave him alone. But, in the name of Heaven, what had I better do? I wish I had not called upon that accursed Pole, and then I should not have been burdened with the knowledge of this horror. I can do nothing. I could tear down to Versailles, and to what end? I might do actual harm. It might be said that I had some knowledge of the deed that was to be done—the police will accuse a man of anything, and that Pole is in league with them."

And the manager, to do him justice, more agitated at the news he had heard, than disturbed at the possibility of his getting into difficulty, sat down

and meditated on the extraordinary position in which he had been placed. And in the mean time others were as excited as himself, and with even more cause.

A few moments after Adair had finished transcribing the contents of the *affiche* in front of the house in the avenue, a ceremony which he performed with some ostentation, even returning as if to verify what he had written down, Mary Henderson, emerging from a back street in the neighbourhood, hurried away from the town, and made for a point in the road near the spot where Silvain had met Ernest.

She waited some time, expecting the arrival of her lover, and evinced some of her characteristic impatience. She walked up and down rapidly, and cast eager glances up and down the approaches.

"It is done, though," she said, by way of calming herself. "Only when one has done anything, it is so aggravating to be kept waiting by the person to whom one burns to tell it. Ah, here he comes, and at what a pace, poor fellow. I will not say a severe word to him."

Silvain was certainly coming—coming, too, with all the speed he could put on. No lover ever hurried at that rate to any love-making since the world began. Even Henderson, with all her knowledge of Silvain's devotion, not to speak of his awe, could not attribute that excess of zeal to his mere desire not to keep her waiting.

"You have news!" she cried, the instant he came within hearing.

"News indeed," answered the panting Silvain.

And in half a dozen hurried words he told her that Adair was in the house, and that Mr. Urquhart had followed him.

"I knew it would be so, I knew it would be so. *I saw him* for a moment, Silvain. I knew that he was come for vengeance. It is too dreadful. I must tell the poor lady—I must tell her—I have lost my head—I must tell her."

Mrs. Lygon had been reading in her chamber, but her heart was far away from the book, which had fallen from her hand. She was far away in England, and a child was at her knee, and the soft cheek of another child, a younger one, rested against her own, and she heard its murmur of affection, an inarticulate utterance to all the world, and more eloquent than any words to one heart.

In a moment Laura was brought back to the realities of her position.

The door suddenly opened, and Henderson, without a word of apology, rushed to the side of Laura.

"The vengeance has come!—it has come upon him, m'm! It has come now!"

The girl was indeed terrified, and it was with difficulty that she could bring out the words.

Terror is contagious, and Mrs. Lygon clutched at the arm of Henderson, and faintly demanded her meaning.

"They are in the empty house together, Mrs.

Lygon !—there will be murder, if it has not been done already ! "

" Who ?—who are, girl ?—speak ! "

" Adair, m'm, and Mr. Urquhart has rushed into him. There will be murder now, if ever in this world ! "

CHAPTER XIV.

HENDERSON had doubtless expected that the announcement she had to make would produce its natural effect upon Mrs. Lygon. For terror, for bewilderment, and for their commonplace manifestation, the messenger had been prepared, nay, had even had a moment to think of the equally commonplace means of calming another woman's sudden agitation. But when the girl's message was fully delivered, and Mrs. Lygon, after her first astonishment, had comprehended the situation of affairs, her excitement took a form which baffled the understanding of her companion. With lips and cheek pale as ashes, Mrs. Lygon resumed the seat from which she had sprung, and gazed steadily upon Henderson.

"This must not be," said Mrs. Lygon, after a pause. "It must be prevented."

Henderson could utter only a meaningless exclamation.

"You must come with me to the police," Mrs. Lygon continued. "Yes, that is the only way. Women can do nothing. Come with me."

And she hastily sought for hat and scarf.

"All the police in the world would be too late, m'm," exclaimed Henderson.

"Why do you say so?"

"They are in the house together—they were in the house together before I came away."

"It may not be too late. I will go. It must not be, it shall not be," she added, to herself rather than to Henderson, and descended the stair. "He dares not meet Robert Urquhart, unless—. We must walk faster, Mary," Mrs. Lygon said, impatiently, as they came into the road.

"But I have something more to say, m'm, if you will let me," said Henderson, keeping pace with the rapid step of Mrs. Lygon.

"When we have seen the police," said Laura, hastening in the direction of the house where Adair had been conveyed after the affray at Silvain's, and whence Robert Urquhart had come, with the fatal knowledge that he had used so terribly.

"We shall only lose time, m'm," said Henderson, despairingly, "but it is no matter. If we hurried to the avenue ourselves—"

"I must not," said Mrs. Lygon, in a low voice. "But the police-station is in the way there," she added, increasing her pace. "O, this is dreadful. But he *dares* not die thus."

And they hurried on together.

CHAPTER XV.

"*Formerly Allingham,*" was very neatly written under the name engraved upon the card brought in to Mrs. Hawkesley.

She had availed herself of Bertha's having fallen asleep, and had come down to the study to hurry off a few lines to her husband.

"Mr. Berry—certainly, yes. Here. And be sure to let me know the moment I am wanted."

"It is many years since I saw you, my dear lady," said Mr. Berry, "and I suppose that you will hardly remember me. Yet I think I should recognise something of the expression of the young lady who came to me two or three times about some alterations in her papa's house—something which I had to obtain leave for him to do."

"That must have been my sister Laura," said Mrs. Hawkesley. "There were no alterations in my time: we were not rich enough then to make improvements," she added, with her customary *naïveté*.

"Was it so?" returned the old gentleman, smiling for a moment, but immediately becoming grave again. "My eyes and my memory alike warn me that my work is nearly over. Can you spare me a few minutes for a little conversation?"

"Certainly," replied Mrs. Hawkesley. "But have you come up from Lipthwaite? Let me offer you—"

Her hand was on the bell, but he stopped her, with the apologetic courtesy of what is called the old school, which means the school whose teaching included the lesson that though women, of course, are created to serve us, it is as well to make their servitude appear voluntary.

"I am staying in town," he said, "and have recently breakfasted. At all events, let me say what I have to say at once. Mr. Hawkesley is in Paris."

"You know that! You have no bad news for me! He is not ill?"

"No, no, certainly not, my dear lady. I was merely about to say that I know he is in Paris, and why."

"Thank God. This is very foolish, but I have been under a great deal of excitement lately, and have not had much sleep. Do not suppose that I am a victim to nerves," added Mrs. Hawkesley, smiling, but perceptibly relieved.

"I ought to beg pardon for my abruptness. But at my time of life, when one has something to say, one is too apt to make haste to say it. I should have been more careful in my old professional days, when you were one of the ornaments of Lipthwaite."

"I will not hear that, after you have shown that you have quite forgotten me, Mr. Berry. Is it

business that you came about?—I mean that it is a pity Charles is away."

"You had a visit, some time ago, from Mrs. Berry?" said he, without more direct reply to her inquiry.

"Yes, and I ought to have asked at once after her."

"Forgive me, but I am aware of the nature of the interview you had, and that it was not likely to create any great friendliness of feeling. I am sure that you will, however, allow me to speak openly to you, and will not think that I have come needlessly to renew a painful discussion."

"Such of us as have known you, Mr. Berry, know you too well to believe anything that you would not like believed."

"Mrs. Berry is exceedingly, I fear dangerously ill, and under other circumstances I should not be in London. But I have a duty to do, and I am obliged to take the most direct means of doing it, in order to be able to return to Lipthwaite at the earliest moment. Your husband and Mr. Lygon being both absent from England, I am compelled to see you, Mrs. Hawkesley, upon the subject in question, and you will, I know, forgive me."

"Mrs. Berry is so ill—?"

"Yes. But for her illness it would have been her own place to make certain explanations which are due, but this is entirely out of the question, unless those whom she ought to see could be summoned to Lipthwaite. Therefore, however painful it may be

to me to be the medium of communication, and to you to receive it, we have no choice, and I am sure that you will hear me with all womanly forbearance."

"Pray speak freely, Mr. Berry, and be sure that I know you mean kindly."

"At all events, I mean justly. You are aware, Mrs. Hawkesley, that when your brother-in-law suddenly found himself placed in the most painful of circumstances, he came to consult me, as his oldest friend, and that acting upon impressions which he received in my house, he left England for France, placing his daughter under our charge during his absence. The little one, weary of the restraint of our quiet house—"

"Let me say a word for my little niece, Mr. Berry. Not weary of a quiet house, but unable to bear the continued stream of false and cruel things which she had to hear about her mother."

The old man's face assumed an expression of humiliation which it was painful to see upon his kindly features, and Mrs. Hawkesley hastened to add,

"But things which she never heard from *you*, Mr. Berry, as she has told me over and over again."

"No matter," said Mr. Berry, "Perhaps there has been no time to tell me everything, but no matter. I did not know—"

And his eyes dimmed, and his lips trembled for a moment or two. Then he said,

"I am glad that the little girl has not much to say against me."

"She loves you heartily, Mr. Berry, and she shall tell you so herself before you go out of the house."

"Let me go on," he said, with a sad smile. "It is necessary that I should recal one or two things which you may never have heard, or having heard then, were not interested enough to recollect them. And remember, it is only as matter of duty, and at the special desire of her who is now unable to act for herself, that I enter into such details. You understand this?"

"I do indeed, dear Mr. Berry."

"To a wife who is upon a wife's terms with a husband, to a wife who is his best friend, and who cares for no friend on earth in comparison with him, to a wife, in fact, who loves her husband, it may seem strange for me to talk of restricted confidence and of questions avoided by mutual consent. But it happens, and that is all that need be said on the matter, that my marriage with Miss Wagstaffe was a union of esteem to a certain extent, and of convenience, perhaps, to a still greater extent, and even before our wedding it was quite well understood between us that what is called love was out of the question. I was not foolish enough, at my age, to suppose that her heart had anything to do with her consent to marry me, or that she had not previously seen more than one person whom she would not sooner have married than the middle-aged, quiet, well-to-do country lawyer. But this is the history of many a match that has turned out

very well, so far as the world knows, and I am not going to say that either of us acted unwisely."

Mrs. Hawkesley listened quietly, and made no sign of dissent from doctrines against which, under other circumstances, she would have protested according to her custom. Perhaps she had in her mind another marriage in which a similar element had worked to the destruction of happiness.

"It pleased God that our children should not live."

"Ah!"

"Yes, I understand that pity, but it is misplaced. I thank God that our children did not live."

"Mr. Berry!" exclaimed Beatrice, with a mother's unfeigned horror.

"They are sad words, are they not?"

"I would call them wicked words if I were not speaking to one who might be my own father," she answered, energetically.

"They are not, but let them pass."

Be it said that she continued to listen, but that the kindliness of feeling with which she had begun to regard Mr. Berry was chilled by his strange language on a subject on which her heart would tolerate no profanity.

"I repeat," he said, "that I am thankful to be childless. When an old man tells that to a young mother, let her think well before she condemns him—let her think what she would have to feel and to suffer before words like those could come

from her lips. And then let her listen to him with patience."

Beatrice looked pityingly at him, but did not answer.

"I have no long story to tell you, Mrs. Hawkesley, my business being only to help in an act of justice. I am not here to enter upon revelations of a life that might have been cheerful, if not happy, but which was incessantly embittered by the abiding pressure of a conviction, not only that I was not loved—I had bargained for that—but that I was disliked. I was not long in discovering that my wife's old thoughts and old loves came perpetually between me and herself, that at the best I was tolerated, but that at the times when she gave way to her rapidly increasing irritability and melancholy, I was almost the object of her hate. Whether I bore this conviction well or ill is between me and Heaven; whether I remembered that though I had given this wife much which the world esteems, I could not be to her that which woman covets amid all the advantages of life; whether I gladly recognised any of her few kindnesses, and bore in silent patience with her habitual coldness and repugnance, let her say when she has to answer for all. It is enough for me that I can reveal this part of my history to you, and feel I have no excuses to make for myself—no self-accusation to tender as excuse for her."

"You do not mean to ask that I shall judge—" began Mrs. Hawkesley, in a troubled voice.

"I have only to ask you to hear, and I will make what you have to hear as brief as I can. I pass over the years spent in this manner. The world thought that the rich lawyer had married a rather strangely-tempered woman, but supposed that they got on as many other couples do, and will do to the end of the chapter. And so the world might have continued to think, for what I had borne so long, I might have borne to the last, but it was not to be so. I need not dwell upon the circumstances which, some few years back, directed the mind of Mrs. Berry into what is termed religion. Enough to say that she devoted herself to its external pursuits with an ardour that was strange to those who had known her slightly, detestable to me, who had my own insight into her character. I will only tell you that the real influences of religion never approached her heart and never softened her nature—never caused her to shed a tear of penitence, or to show any womanly gentleness to the husband who had sought to fulfil his duty. You look at me as if I were drawing too harsh a picture—as if this was not language in which I ought to speak of my own wife—"

"It is very painful language."

"It is the language which I am sent here to speak. It is what Marion Berry herself ought to say, were she here, making her confession. I will soon relieve you of your care for her, for the story now connects itself with your own family—with your own sister. I told you just now that what I

had borne so long I could have borne to the end. It was destined that I should have more to bear. Your sister, Mrs. Lygon, left her husband's roof, and among the consequences that followed were revelations which I little expected would disturb the later hours of my life."

"Of yours?"

"Yes. Do not apprehend a scene, or that a man of my years is about to give way to what would befit a man of Lygon's. I am here as the messenger from a sick bed which may have been changed to a dying bed before I return to my home. I am here to say, for one who cannot say it for herself, that when Marion Berry was in this house she uttered much which was intended to make you and your husband believe that your sister Laura was unworthy, and that now, stretched upon her bed, Marion Berry begs you to believe, on the word of one who may never rise again, that she spoke falsely. That is a fitting message for a husband to bring from his wife!"

"Did she ever say to you," asked Mrs. Hawkesley, in a low voice, though her eyes were shining with excitement, "that either Charles or myself believed one word of her tale?"

"Your husband believed it, in spite of his affected indignation with her,—so run my instructions," said the old man.

"He did not," replied Beatrice, "and it is needless to say that I knew it to be false. It is right that the retractation should be made, but it is utterly unnecessary."

"This, of course, I expected to hear. Yet you will do well not to throw away a single link in the chain of evidence that is required to establish the innocence of your sister."

"We want no evidence, Mr. Berry, and I wish that she were here, that you might see how much credence we have given to the wicked slanders that have been spoken against her."

"You speak well, and nobly, dear lady," said Mr. Berry, looking at her animated face with some admiration; "but what says Mrs. Lygon's husband?"

"By this time, I trust, he has told Laura herself that he never really doubted her."

"You picture her in his arms, and all forgiven?"

"God is just, and it surely will be so."

"Ay, He is just; but not with such justice as we measure out. Do not deceive yourself. I should not have come here to assure you of that which you believed without me, unless I had more to tell you. You imagine that Arthur Lygon has forgiven his wife. How, then, do you suppose that she has answered the one question which must have gone before forgiveness?"

"What question?"

"The first that must spring to the lips of a husband, abandoned by his wife. Why did she fly to France?"

"Bertha is in this house, and has told me," said Mrs. Hawkesley, calmly.

"Mrs. Urquhart? She is here!"

"She is here."

"Tell me, Mrs. Hawkesley," said the old man, in much agitation, "tell me, for Heaven's sake, and in a word—you know that I ask only for the good and happiness of you all—Mrs. Urquhart is here—but—but—let me speak plainly—*she* has not persuaded you that she is innocent?"

"My husband brought her here," said Beatrice, with dignity.

"You evade my question, or it is as I suspect, and Laura is made the sacrifice," exclaimed Mr. Berry, eagerly.

"It is not so," said Mrs. Hawkesley, moved by his evident sympathy with Laura. "We will not speak of Bertha."

"Ah, so far I am answered."

"And she has declared that Arthur has nothing to forgive."

"Nothing to forgive—is she mad? Will she say that to Arthur Lygon when he demands why his wife went away, and hid herself from him, and sent him no word of explanation, or petition, or apology. Nothing to forgive!"

"I have said enough," replied Mrs. Hawkesley, quietly. "The rest will be set right in Paris, and I shall hear that it has been set right."

"You are one of the best of women, I see that," said the old man, so earnestly that the strangeness of the speech was lost in the sincerity of the speaker. "But here is nothing but misery in store, unless we clear up the mystery, and you will not hear me, or be convinced that there is anything to

be done. Do you not know that Mrs. Lygon is accused, on solemn evidence, of being that which you will not believe her?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Hawkesley, promptly, "and her husband and mine are gone over to tear that evidence to pieces."

"And will that destroy its effects?"

"I do not understand."

"Will tearing up those papers cancel the testimony they bore?"

"Ah! you take up my words literally—I meant that Charles and Mr. Lygon would disprove all."

"And that is what they cannot do."

"Cannot?"

"Without the aid which I have come to bring. It is this which has hurried me up to town from the house in which a woman, who bears my name, is lying, probably on a death-bed, and it is this which you must accept, or all that may be attempted in Paris will be worse than failure—worse, for if the breach be not now closed, it will be so widened that it will close no more until the judgment."

"What do you come to tell me?" asked Beatrice, partaking his agitation.

"Do you know the evidence against your sister?"

"There are some letters, I am told. There is a book of letters, and it is a wicked lie to say that she wrote a word of them."

"*It is not.*"

Mrs. Hawkesley looked at him with indignation

for a moment, but his face expressed so much unfeigned sorrow, and was so utterly divested of anything like the triumph which a vulgar nature permits to be visible when an apparent advantage has been gained, even in a sad discussion, that she was almost disarmed. Yet she could not help replying,

"Mr. Berry, you have the kindest meaning, and I should be ashamed to answer you with a word of unkindness. But you have told me that you come only as a messenger, and there is no offence to you in my saying that you bring a false message. This is another malignant effort made by one who, if she is so prostrated as you say, should be repentant, and not give you falsehoods to bring us, and try to create fresh wretchedness."

"It is natural—very natural, that you should say this," said the old man, quietly. "I have heard enough, and far more than enough, to make me well aware that you must hate her who has sent me here to-day. But do not blind yourself, even with a natural passion. You have heard the truth from me."

"I am writing to my husband. I will write down what you have just said. He will believe it no more than I do; but you will wish him to hear it?"

"He must do much more than that," said Mr. Berry, "and I beg that you will not be rash. I am an old man, and I assure you, with all the sincerity of one who has nothing to hope or fear in this world, that unless you are guided in this business, you, or

your husband, will destroy for ever the chance of re-uniting Laura and her husband. Do you believe that she was justified in leaving him?"

"I believe that she will justify herself to him."

"You do not—you cannot. You are deceiving yourself between hope and love. But what earthly excuse have you devised for a virtuous wife and mother who rushes away from a happy home? What excuse, if you yourself should commit such an act of madness, would you hold to justify you?"

"This is for Arthur, not for me to decide," replied Beatrice.

"Nay, nay, you have no solution of the mystery. Do you not know that when Mrs. Lygon left, Arthur hurried down to me, and that it was this very question which exhausted our best energies, and left us without a clue or guide? Has the case mended by her long absence, since then? Yet you will not see this, and will not hear that there is indeed evidence against her."

"Mr. Berry," said Mrs. Hawkesley, "I know that you will acquit me of intending offence, but I cannot help answering, that everything that comes from—from Lipthwaite—"

"From Mrs. Berry."

"That *is* my meaning; and I regret that everything from that quarter is so tainted with the poison of her wicked hatred that I refuse to have anything to do with such suggestions. I will not say that you are influenced by her—"

"Yes, say it, if you think it. An old man, married

to a younger woman, and one of an artful and resolute nature, has been deluded into believing whatever her malice may have dictated. It is true that he has humiliated himself by describing his own sorrow and misery, but that may be only part of the fraud, and may have been enjoined upon him by his wife, in order to give a better colour to the story."

"You are putting words into my mouth—"

"But not thoughts into your mind. I have but said what has been passing through it. No matter. I love Arthur Lygon as if he had been my own son, and I will shrink at nothing that can help to restore to him his happiness. You, convinced of the innocence of your sister, refuse to assist me, because you disbelieve that I am speaking the truth. I had hoped to convince you without other words, but it shall be done."

"Mr. Berry—"

"You must listen to me now, and if hereafter you think of this interview, and I trust that it may be one to which you will look back with gratitude in other respects, you will remember that you forced an old man to his last resource—to a confession which man should not make to woman—before you would consent to be useful to your sister."

"You speak very unkindly."

"We are all unkind—so be it. Mrs. Hawkesley, if those letters which have established in the mind of Mr. Urquhart the conviction which he has now imparted to Mr. Lygon and to Mr. Hawkesley—you look incredulous, but it is so—if those accursed

letters, I say, are destroyed in France, Laura Lygon and her husband had better formally part for ever, for they will never again be husband and wife."

"Will you tell me why you say so?"

"Because Arthur Lygon will never be able to efface from his mind the conviction that, though that miscreant, Ernest Adair, has chosen to repudiate the letters, he has done so from base reasons, and that the truth was really set before Mr. Urquhart."

"Base reasons," repeated Mrs. Hawkesley.

"That he has been bribed to declare the letters to be forgeries."

"And who should bribe him?"

"Mrs. Lygon, or her friends, specially your husband. There, now your eye flashes, and your cheek reddens, but be calm. I am speaking for Mrs. Lygon, you are struggling against her interests. You think that Arthur Lygon will dare to entertain no such dastardly idea—even if he should cling to a suspicion that may affect his own wife—will he venture to suspect your own honourable husband? He would do ill—he would wrong a man worthy a wife like yourself, but, Mrs. Hawkesley, he will do it. You know not, and never may you know, the self-communings that pass between man and his soul at hours when both should be at rest. You know nothing of the spectres that rise in the cool dawn when a man awakens, with his body helpless from the languor of the night, but his mind feverishly vigorous to snatch and cherish all foul and bitter thoughts. That is the time when, with his brow

within the breath of his slumbering wife, Arthur Lygon will lie and weave his stubborn doubts into a damnable faith, and will scowl down upon her while she is dreaming of him and of her children."

"I cannot answer you," said Mrs. Hawkesley, nearly crying. "If such evil thoughts are allowed to haunt us—"

"We know where to go for the exorcism. Yes, but Arthur Lygon has never learned that lesson. Make this hollow peace if you can, destroy those letters, and on some still morning Lygon will rise up from the side of his sleeping wife, and steal from the room—and she will see him no more."

"What would you have me do?"

"First, be convinced yourself, or you will convince no one else. And now hear me. It was with no good will that Mrs. Berry sent me on the message I have come to deliver."

"I am sure of that."

"The retractation of what was said here was her own voluntary act, for she believes that she is dying, and I know not what idea of reparation and of salvation may have instigated her, but the message was given, and were that all, I should have written it, not charged myself with the delivery of aught so painful. But when I tell you that we must have those letters in England, I tell you what was wrung from the abject terror of a proud woman, who yielded to a threat more fearful to her than anything which her minister could tell her of flames and tortures."

"I do not wish to hear of this," said Beatrice.

"But it is necessary that you should, or you will not act. Do not think that I am speaking for the sake of Mrs. Lygon, or any of you, save one person, and that is Arthur Lygon, whom I will save from misery if I can. Remember that, even when I reveal to you that I, Edward Allingham Berry, master of a secret that I had kept for years, menaced my wife with its disclosure, unless she, in her turn, gave up to me the secret of those letters—"

"And she gave it?" asked Mrs. Hawkesley, almost trembling.

"Ask its price," said the old man.

"That does not—that is not for me to know, but tell me of the letters."

"No, I will first tell you how you may be sure that I bring you the truth about them."

He leaned forward, and in a low voice, but without looking at her, uttered a few words.

Beatrice's face and brow crimsoned, and she turned from him.

"You are writing to your husband," he said. "You need say nothing of that which I have just said to you, but tell him that the truth has been bought at a great price, and bid him bring those letters to England. I think that you will do so—I think that he will obey. If not, your sister's misery be upon the heads of both of you. It is not likely that we shall ever meet any more in this world, Mrs. Hawkesley, nor is it fit that we should. But if you do your duty in this matter as I have done mine,

the old man forgives you for having forced him to say what he has said in this room. That is for little Clara," he added, throwing an envelope on the table. "Farewell, Mrs. Hawkesley. It rests with you to save your sister!"

CHAPTER XVI.

ERNEST ADAIR, unconscious that he was watched, crossed the sill of the window that looked upon the garden of the house, formerly Mr. Urquhart's, and stood in the little room at the back of the apartment in which the engineer kept his models and other lumber. It will be remembered as the chamber in which Mrs. Lygon had been secreted by Bertha and by Henderson, and into which Urquhart had forced his way, unaware that an unbidden guest was concealed behind it. The door, which had yielded to the strength of Robert Urquhart, had never been repaired, and the state of its locks and bolts gave evidence to the terrible strength that had wrenched it open. It was thrown back upon its hinges, and this was an advantage to Adair, for the room into which he had entered was somewhat gloomy with the shade of the approaching evening, and some helpful light streamed across the dusty lumber-chamber.

For the rest, the apartment looked as melancholy as a room which has been occupied by women and forsaken by them ever looks. A man's relics, his book, his wasted paper, his discarded pen, and the prosaic litter of his abandoned cave, inspire little sentiment; but the scrap of woman's work, the trace

of woman's idle business, the forgotten ribbon, the dropped embroidery, speak of gracious and playful companionship, of the light laugh and the merry glance, and speak of them as of things that have wronged us by departing. And some of these signs had been left in the chamber into which Ernest strode, across the window-sill. He had a glance for them, but not much sympathy.

"I am strangely nervous," he said, "and yet I have been careful enough as to drinking and all that. The slight exertion of forcing that shutter and lifting the window has made my hand tremble. Is it an omen? I doubt whether I could write a neat despatch. I must take more exercise—this sort of thing will not do."

While he spoke he drew away a table that stood near the door of a closet on one side of the room. The door itself, with its panel to match the woodwork, would almost have escaped notice, except that it had given a little, and a dingy-looking crack marked its upper line. It had no handle, but a piece of faded tape, sent through a hole where a lock had once been, answered the purpose, or rather had answered it for the last time, for Adair, pulling vigorously at the frail string, broke it off short.

"Omen number two," said Adair, smiling at his own folly. "My hand is in a tremble, and the door refuses to open to me. But we defy auguries."

He wrenched this door open with a piece of iron that had flown from the other when Urquhart broke into the room.

The closet, or cupboard, as it had once been, presented a display of rubbish which had been cast in to be out of the way, rather than for preservation. A box or two, bundles of old papers, dusty folios, and some other engineer's room relics, were the principal articles disclosed as the door came reluctantly open.

From the lower part of the closet Adair pulled away the litter that concealed the floor, and then stepped back to allow the dust to subside. Then he threw down a tolerably clean piece of newspaper which he found at hand, and was about to kneel upon it before the closet.

"Stop, though," he said, "that infernal French ink comes off."

As he spoke, he took up the piece of paper, and his eye accidentally fell upon the date, which happened to be on the fragment.

"Why," he said, with an oath, "that is a paper of this last week."

He looked at it again, as if expecting to find that it was a year old. But no, the date was there before his eyes, and the paper, torn and dirty, was not a week old.

"How the devil could that have come?" said Adair. "Omen number three," passed across his mind, but the business just then was too heavy for scoffing, and it was with a hot flush that he fell upon his knees, and lifted up a sort of flap that lay at the bottom of the closet, a small trapdoor that opened into a cavity of some little depth. As he pushed

open this trap, and was about to plunge his arm into the cavity below, he heard a footstep on the garden gravel, and the next instant the shutter which he had opened on making his way into the house was closed.

It was not by the wind. A strong hand drove it close home, and struck it to make all sure.

Ernest Adair sprang to his feet, and his heart beat with terrible quickness—in the stillness of the chamber he could hear the throb. Another moment, and he dashed his hand across his eyes with an impatient gesture, and listened intently.

He heard, or thought he heard the sound of retreating feet, and a word, or rather a growl, signifying that some order was understood. Then Ernest laid his hand for a moment upon his heart, but with the danger had come the courage, and it was not to count the beatings that he placed his hand there.

Next, and unmistakeably, he heard a key in the lock of the front door. He darted to the door of the apartment in which he stood, nearly closed it, and holding it with a firm hand, listened.

CHAPTER XVII.

THERE is a crowd about the gate of the garden that is before the house in the avenue, but the people do not come nearer than the gate, for the police is there, and stern orders are given to stand away, and no one dares to climb upon the coping of the little wall, which, in England, would have long since been swarming with a double line of clinging gazers.

It is easy enough to keep off a well-behaved and obedient mob, but it is not so easy for the all-powerful police to enter the house, although they know that a fierce deed has been done there. The front door has been tried in every way, but the key inside prevents false keys from being used, and all the united force of the stalwart gendarmes has been brought to bear, but vainly. But the police are in earnest, and the crowd stands back as an officer passes out to summon the nearest blacksmith. Meantime other officers inspect the lower windows, but they are securely fastened with shutters, and to break in that way will require instruments.

They listen, however, and order silence in the crowd that they may listen the better, and the intelligent French mob instantly comprehends the object, and is hushed. But the police do not give

sign that they can hear anything within. It would be strange if they could.

The officer has not returned with the blacksmith, and two Englishmen arrive hastily. These are Hawkesley and Aventayle. The crowd let them pass, and the former addresses a few words to one of the gendarmes, and is recognised and admitted, with his friend, before he has finished his sentence.

"Why does not somebody get a ladder, and go through a first-floor window? There is one open," is the prompt and practical demand of Mr. Aventayle.

But the police look coldly at the speaker, and prefer to do things in their own way. And here comes their comrade with a working-man in a clean blouse. He had done his work, and was going out, but has seized two or three hammers and a wedge, and hastens in aid of the law.

The smith is brought up to the door, and looks at it and those who have sent for him, and delays operations for a minute or two, and then removes his blouse, with the air of a man who is master of the situation. But the police have little patience with sentiment, and a sharp word, which calls up an angry glance in the man's dark eye, nevertheless quickens him, and he places his wedge on the hinge side of the door. An exclamation of approval from one of the officers brings a slight smile of contempt to the smith's lips.

"I suppose that you would try there," he says, pointing to the lock, "so that when you had broken

the bolts, you might have the further pleasure of breaking the chain, if you could."

"How do you know that there is a chain?"

"Because I put it up myself, and was desired to make it strong, as the house was left to women, who wished to be secure."

"And are not the hinges secure?"

"I was not told to do anything to the hinges," replies the blacksmith.

They stood his blows, however, very well, and it was some time before he could make an opening for the wedge. It was gained at last, and the man struck hard, and the strong door began to give way.

Hawkesley was watching eagerly as the upper part of the door seemed to be yielding, and was ready to be the first to rush into the house, when Aventayle said:

"Surely she should not have come."

"She—who?" and Hawkesley turning, saw Mrs. Lygon making her way through the crowd.

He sprang away, and was by her side in a moment.

"I beg you not to come, Laura," he said. "This is no place for you. For God's sake stop away from the house. I will fetch you, if you will, when we have done."

"I must come in with you, Charles."

"You do not know what you are asking—"

"I must come in. You cannot understand why I say so—but you must let me come. All my life may hang on a moment's speech with him."

"With him,—with whom?" said Hawkesley, impatiently.

Before Laura could reply, Henderson hurried up.

"It is useless, it is wicked—you must not, madam, indeed you must not. It is too dreadful. Take her away, sir, for the love of Heaven. It is too dreadful!"

The girl's face was pale with terror, and her bright keen eyes shone out with a ghastly effect. She clung to Laura, and with gesture and earnest words implored her to keep back.

"I must see him," said Laura, in a low voice.

"You cannot, dear lady, you cannot. And if you—"

But a crash announced that under the blows of the smith, aided by the pressure of the other men, the door had given way.

Hawkesley was about to run back to the house, but paused to adjure Laura to wait his return.

"If you would only hear me for one moment, dear lady," implored Henderson. "Run in, Mr. Hawkesley, run in. I am sure that Mrs. Lygon will give me one minute."

He saw that the girl had something that she *would* say, saw that she would detain Laura, by force if needful, and he darted back, and hurried into the house.

The police had already rushed through the large room in front, and through the smaller chamber, and had found no one. Charles Hawkesley hastened up-stairs to the drawing-rooms, and as he reached

the landing, a gendarme, followed by another, confronted him—they had ascended by the private stair from the room at the back, the stair down which Mrs. Lygon had been conducted to her hiding-place.

The next moment Hawkesley was in the front drawing-room. It was empty.

Not so the second room.

There were signs there that men had closed in a fierce struggle, and near the open window the carpet was torn from its fastenings as by the stamping and grinding of foot and heel—furniture had been dashed about in that wild strife.

But these were points for the police to note. Hawkesley saw none of them.

He saw only the dead body of Robert Urquhart.

There lay the strong man. Upon his lip was blood, but this had flowed, as was plain, from wounds self-inflicted, and when he had set his teeth grimly, in some access of fiery passion, now still for ever. But he had died by a single blow,—a blow that had been delivered truly, and home. It had been struck, and he had gone down. Across the place of the wound the fold of the loose coat had fallen, and it was not until one of the officers gently drew it back, that the tale was told. It was not told in the face, for upon the strong features had come a calm that gave them a loftiness they had rarely shown in life, and upon the bleeding lip there was almost a smile.

"That man has not died in the presence of his

murderer," said, in a low voice, one of the officers—a soldier who had seen other deaths. "What is that gold in his hand?"

The hand was stiffening, but it yielded easily as yet, and Hawkesley drew from its clasp a small locket. It had been worn on a ribbon, which was broken, and there were specks of blood upon the glass, as if it had been pressed to the wounded lips.

Hawkesley knew well the fair hair of Bertha.

"He has forgiven her—forgiven her his death—but that was the least he had to pardon," said Hawkesley, his voice breaking with his tears.

But he spoke in presence of the dead only—the officers had dispersed on the traces of the assassin.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AVENTAYLE had lingered behind his friend, for, lacking the personal interest which hurried Hawkesley on to whatever sight might be in store for him, the former owned to a shuddering repugnance to encounter, needlessly, a spectacle of terror. A few words from one of the men told him that a far other result than that which he had expected had followed the meeting of the enemies, and Aventayle, made yet more willing to be spared a terrible sight, gladly accepted the thought that he had better be the first to break the truth to Laura.

But she was gone.

"Had she been told?" asked Aventayle, hurriedly.

"Madame knows all, sir!" said, respectfully, a young man who came up to the Englishman. "The young person who was with her has conducted her home," added Silvain.

"That was kind and right," answered Aventayle, and he turned towards the house, and wished that Hawkesley would descend.

"Monsieur is a friend of Madame Lygon," said Silvain, earnestly.

"At least of her family—of Mr. Hawkesley."

"So I am informed; and it would be kind if

Monsieur would deign to favour me with a few minutes of conversation."

Aventayle instantly assented; and Silvain, leaving a message for Mr. Hawkesley, the charge of which was instantly taken by half a dozen in the crowd, led the Englishman away to some distance.

Silvain briefly explained his acquaintance with the family upon whom this fearful misfortune had come, and if Aventayle had been in the mood for suspicion, the young Frenchman's manner would have dispelled any doubt as to his loyalty. He spoke with little restraint, and as one who considered his being aware of many painful circumstances was not now a fact to be apologised for, more serious affairs being pressing.

"I was desired to tell your friend what I am about to tell you, Monsieur, but it was afterwards thought that I might more properly confide it to yourself, to be again mentioned to him at such time as you may think best."

"I will do so," said Aventayle. "My God! what has happened? That man, whom I saw in all his health and strength in the court of the hotel, and now!"

"We may die for glory, we may die for duty," said Silvain, "but it is hard to die in vain, as that brave man has done."

"We have no right to say that of any death," said Aventayle, after a pause. "But these police, will they hunt down the murderer, or will they let

him escape? and the people, why are they not encouraged to joint in the hunt? Surely he has not had time to get far away."

"He will not escape," replied Silvain, "but the police will have their own way. Will Monsieur pardon me if I ask him to attend, for a short time, to what concerns the welfare of the living rather than revenge for the dead?"

"Go on—I will do my best to bear what you say in mind. But I feel as if I had in some way been mixed up with this fearful business, and I am scarcely a free agent."

"We ought all to feel thus when a crime against society has been committed," said Silvain, who had read some books, and remembered something of what was in them. "But the crime will be punished, in the mean time let us attend to ourselves."

They walked on as he spoke, and quite beyond observation of those who had collected, and were rapidly collecting in the avenue.

"I would not speak much of the painful business which has brought you, Monsieur, and your friends to France," said Silvain, "but as I am to make you completely understand, I must suppose that you know that the person who is, doubtless, the assassin of M. Urquhart, had a secret which involved the reputation of two ladies. One of them is now a widow," he added, pointing in the direction of the house, "the other I need not name."

"I know all this—more than I desire to know."

"But is Monsieur aware of the business which brought the man Adair this day to Versailles?"

"I have some knowledge of it," said Aventayle. "And I have reason to know that he was supposed to be about to rush into a very great peril, and that it was certainly not thought that he would leave that house alive."

Silvain's face assumed a warning expression.

"Pardon me," he said, "but that is far more than any man should say to any other man when such an event has happened. I will consider it not said, but Monsieur will do well to be guarded. I will only assume that it is understood that this Adair had a very important object in view when he came to the house of the late M. Urquhart."

"That I know nothing about."

"It was so, and I am to inform you of the circumstances, in order that M. Hawkesley may know them. Adair had in his possession a volume of letters which he produced to the unfortunate man whom he has slain, and these letters are the fatal evidence against the lady who—who is now dwelling in Versailles."

"*Had* in his possession, you say. Do you mean that he has not now got them?"

"That is the point to which I am coming, Monsieur. This Adair, of whom I cannot speak with too much abhorrence, was an agent of the police, and may still consider himself so; I have reason to believe that he so deludes himself. That he was so, however, is certain, and equally certain that

he was for a long time here at Versailles, at which time, though he did not know it, he was as vigilantly watched as any person upon whom he had been ordered to keep his eyes. I myself had a share in observing him."

"Another agent of police," said Aventayle, drawing back involuntarily.

"Nothing of the kind, Monsieur," said Silvain, with some dignity. "In my own interest, and to repay certain wrongs, I availed myself in the single case of this man of certain offers that were made to me, but it was in this case only, and I shall never again undertake such a duty. When I tell Monsieur that I am about to marry an Englishwoman, he will probably receive my word as to the police question."

"Yes," said Aventayle, bluntly, "I do not believe that an honest English girl would marry a damned spy, and I beg your pardon."

"There is no offence, Monsieur," said Silvain, quietly. "I was about to say that Adair finally discovered that he was watched, and became much more cautious, but not sufficiently so to attain his own ends. He did not really know who was observing him. But he did know that his papers were examined, and at times borrowed, and he was fully aware that none of the ordinary places of concealment which his own lodging gave him were of much use. He was a bold man, and he adopted a bold course."

"Yes?"

"The safe possession of this volume of letters

was everything to him, for he intended to obtain a very large sum for them, and retire to England; and he informed me that he meant to become an actor."

"That is true; and I, who am a manager, was asked by the miscreant to bring him upon the boards."

"For the boards we shall substitute the scaffold, I doubt not," said Silvain, coolly. "He had, Monsieur, become intimately acquainted with the interior of the house in which he has committed this frightful crime. I need not remind you how it happened that he had the means of acquiring that knowledge—"

"I understand."

"But it was intimate and complete. And having this precious volume of evidence to conceal, he placed it in the very house of the man whom he had wronged, and in the very room in which the women whom he had so cruelly injured had been in the habit of spending their hours. That was very brutal, very atrocious."

The nature of Silvain spoke out frankly. He felt that the circumstance he was mentioning aggravated the crimes of Adair.

"Yes, Monsieur, there was a secret recess at the bottom of an almost secret well in a closet in that chamber, and there did Adair deposit his cursed proofs; there where the dresses of the poor ladies must have touched within a few inches of his treacherous book. And, Monsieur, it was to fetch this

book, a task that he would entrust to no other hand, that Adair came back this day to Versailles."

"Ha! To fetch this book of letters. And poor Urquhart found him in the house, and has been killed in endeavouring to arrest him?"

"How it occurred," said Silvain, in a tone that implied his desire not to be needlessly explicit, "how it occurred that M. Urquhart became aware of the intentions of Adair will no doubt appear when Adair is before the tribunal of justice. It is enough that they met in the house, and that Adair has bought his escape at the price of a crime."

"Taking the letters with him?"

"No, Monsieur."

"How do you know that?"

"Because, Monsieur, the letters had been removed from the place of deposit before Adair entered the house."

"By whom?"

"By a trustworthy person, Monsieur."

"Who retains them of course," said Aventayle, instantly suspecting that a new bargain for the evidence was about to be offered. "Well?"

"You are doing an injustice to one who never injured you, Monsieur," said Silvain, reproachfully. "The secret that the letters were hidden in the well-hole became known to the young person whom I am about to marry. Unhappily she did not discover it in time to make the knowledge useful, but at least she was in time to prevent Adair from

gaining a great triumph. She ventured into the house, and secured the letters."

"Well done. I beg her pardon for having wronged her in thought. Then Adair must have searched in vain for them, and perhaps in his rage at the loss, attacked the unhappy man who has died by his hand."

"It may be so, Monsieur. I may believe that M. Urquhart entered the fatal house, intending vengeance upon Adair. But this may be known hereafter. The letters—"

"Yes, the letters, where are they?"

"They are in the hands of Madame Lygon."

"What!" exclaimed Aventayle. "Mrs. Lygon has got all the evidence against her—has got delivered to her without fee or reward what all the police in Paris did not seem likely to get at all? That is a bit of good news in the midst of our trouble."

"There will be neither fee nor reward, Monsieur, given or expected. The poor are not permitted many luxuries, but sometimes they may be allowed the luxury of doing good for nothing."

Aventayle had heard that virtuous sentiment in many a melodrama, but it was uttered by Silvain with so much propriety that it was impossible to regard it with disrespect. And the event of the hour had scared away all disposition to levity, at least in a mind like that of Aventayle. A harder man might have rallied sooner.

"And this is what I am to tell Mr. Hawkesley?"

"This is what I was desired to say."

"Out of evil—and it is dreadful evil—comes good," said Aventayle. "These letters arrive at an hour when we had no right to expect good fortune."

"Whether the recovery of the letters is good fortune or not," said Silvain, gravely, "others have more right to form an opinion than myself. I did not gather, Monsieur, from what has been said to me, that any great gain would arise to the lady who now has them, but it is something to have rescued them from the clutches of Adair, who would have sold them at a high price."

"He, at least, implied that they were invaluable to her," said Aventayle. "But this is, as you say, for others to decide. Have you more to say to me? —I should return to poor Hawkesley."

"You have not asked my name, Monsieur."

"I have not. I have been too much shocked to remember anything.

"Mr. Hawkesley may not know it, but it is well known to Madame Lygon. My name is Silvain, my shop any one in Versailles will show your friend."

"I shall not forget it."

CHAPTER XIX.

He returned to the house, before which the crowd had now collected in large numbers, and it was with some difficulty, and only after an appeal to the police, that Aventayle could make his way to the gate. The strangest stories were being exchanged by the people as to the fearful event, and the most distorted and improbable surmises seemed to receive the most favour. It would have been difficult indeed for the populace that stood before that gate to have imagined the true key to the mystery of the deed that had been done, but the wildness of some of the conjectures that were offered was extraordinary. One tale only need be mentioned, and this because its history is less mysterious than itself. It was distinctly affirmed by several of the crowd that the house was notoriously haunted, that the master who now lay dead had been the terror of the mountain region in which he had lived before coming to France, and that he had escaped to that country in the hope of avoiding the spectre of a woman who in early life had fallen a victim, first to his love and then to his hate. That he had fled in vain, and that having espoused a young and beautiful wife, he had compelled her to share his hours of despair, and to

witness the approach of the spirit. That there was a winding stair in the house, constructed by the murderer to remind him of his castle in Scotland, and that it was up this stair that the spirit glided, at the hour at which the deed had been done, and fled down it shrieking, as the living victim, flying and praying for life, had done in the old castle. At length the poor wife, unable to bear such terrors, had fled to her home in England, but the murderer, though he had shut up the house and endeavoured to leave it, had been compelled to return by the summons of the spirit, and, in madness, had at last died by his own hand. Those who may recall the device by which, when it was desired to exclude the domestics in Mr. Urquhart's employ from the lower portion of the house, the girl Henderson effected that object by a terrifying narrative, have the key to the origin of the story which was freely circulated among the crowd, and to which the female part of it was by no means indisposed to lend belief.

Aventayle was admitted to the house, but was requested to remain in the apartment below, while an official note of the circumstances attending the supposed murder was being completed. But Hawkesley was informed of his having come in, and hastened down.

"It is too fearful to think of now," said Hawkesley, holding his friend's hand. "What shall I say to you for having entangled you in such a terrible business?"

"Not a word, but tell me whether I can be of any use."

"I fear not, but stay. You went out to see Mrs. Lygon."

"She knows all, and has been taken home."

"I know that, and you went away with Silvain, the lover of a girl who attends on Laura."

"You know him then? He is to be trusted?"

"Perfectly."

"He has given me a message for you." And in a few words, few, considering the excited condition of Aventayle, he conveyed to Hawkesley the information Silvain had given.

Brief as the story was, Hawkesley heard it with an impatience that increased from the moment he comprehended the fact that the letters had been rescued from Adair's possession. But the excitement manifested by Hawkesley did not seem to be mixed with the gratification which Aventayle, who had formed his own idea as to the character of the letters, expected. On the contrary, Hawkesley compressed his lips, and paced the apartment hastily.

"I ought not to leave this place, Aventayle," he said, abruptly, "and yet I must see Laura."

"Is there such haste?"

"Yes—her impulse may lead her to—to do what will cause irreparable mischief—and yet to leave *him*, while the officers are making these perquisitions—I must go, however."

"Surely, Hawkesley, you can write, or send such a message by me as will save that necessity?"

"That is true—and yet, unless you comprehend all—but I must not leave that poor, noble fellow in the hands of strangers. Aventayle, find Silvain again—that you can easily do—and make him take you to Mrs. Lygon's lodgings. Say you came from me, and she will, I am sure, see you. But if she is actually too ill to see you, and nothing else will prevent it, speak to the girl, Henderson. She is to be trusted. This is the one message, the solemn charge from me. *Do not destroy one line, as you value all that is dear to you in the world.* Not one line—impress that on her, Aventayle, and say that I came from the dead man's presence, released the dead man's hand, that I might send her that charge."

Silvain had mixed in the crowd, and with a certain scorn, as one who knew the history of the fable, listened to the fiction which has been mentioned.

"It is entirely untrue," he said to a matron who had just finished her version of the story. "The man who lies dead in that house was a brave and noble man."

No one contradicted him, for he spoke almost angrily. But as soon as he had, in obedience to a signal from Aventayle, joined the latter at the outside of the crowd, another matron remarked—

"Of course he will say so. It is his duty. He marries a girl who came from England, and knows the frightful secret."

"She has seen the spectre," affirmed another woman, half terrified at her own speech.

"My son wants a wife," said a third, "but sooner than he should share his bed with a girl who has seen a foul sight like that, I would gladly dress him for his bed in the ground."

Aventayle, under the guidance of Silvain, soon reached the house in which Mrs. Lygon had her apartments.

"I am sure that she cannot see you, sir," was the reply of Henderson. "I hardly dare take the message, but I will venture, as you come from Mr. Hawkesley. At least I will knock."

Mrs. Lygon could see no one—"would see no one," had been the answer to Henderson.

And no inducement, not even Silvain's support of the request, would induce the girl to go up again.

"At any other time," said Henderson; "Silvain knows that I am not easily daunted, and I would go in a moment. But not now. I have never seen her as I have seen her to-day, and there is cause."

"But under any circumstances Mrs. Lygon *must* have the message I bring. You, who have done so much to serve her, will simply be undoing all the good you have done if Mr. Hawkesley's message is not delivered to her."

"You hear this, dear Matilde," said Silvain, earnestly.

"I tell you," said the girl, in a low voice, "I dare not. That is something for me to say."

"Tell me," said Aventayle, "what is Mrs. Lygon doing?"

"*You* know, sir, what has come into her hands to-day."

"Yes, yes, and that must be what Mr. Hawkesley specially means. What is she doing?"

"*Now*," said Henderson, still in a low voice, "she is reading page upon page of handwriting, with her face in a flame, and with the hot tears coming down like rain, but, for all that, the last time I looked into the room, her eyes glared at me like coals of fire. I will not go in again."

"You do not know what mischief you may be doing by your fear," replied Aventayle. "I must speak to her myself, if it is outside her door."

The tapping of a foot was heard in the room above.

"That is for me!" exclaimed the girl.

"Ask her to admit me, if only for a moment," said Aventayle, hastily, "but if this is impossible, say this,"—and he gave Hawkesley's message.

In a few minutes Aventayle was requested to come up-stairs.

Laura was seated at her table, and before her lay the rescued volume—the volume which we have seen but once—when Ernest Adair laid it in the hand of Robert Urquhart. Some hand had torn from it several leaves, but they were still there.

"I am just in time, it seems," said Aventayle, pointing at the volume.

"I am sorry to have sent you down what must have seemed a rude message," said Mrs. Lygon, "but I was very much occupied, and I did not

recognise your name. A friend of Mr. Hawkesley's ought not to have cause to complain of incivility from me."

"Where is this face of flame—where are these coals of fire?" thought Aventayle, as he looked at the beautiful and self-composed woman before him, and listened to her excuse, offered in the tone of the drawing-room. "And yet, after what has happened to-day, what right has she to be so calm? She ought to be agitated. I do not like this woman."

And so hath been judged, and so will be judged until the day of the one judgment, when, for the first time, justice shall be done on earth as it is in Heaven, many a cause that is but half understood.

"Has your servant conveyed the message which Mr. Hawkesley begged me to deliver?"

"I scarcely understood it. But now that I think I understand it, from what you said at coming in, I will only ask you to say that my brother-in-law's wish shall be obeyed to the letter."

There was something of triumph—it was but a little—but it broke out in spite of the well-ordered features, and the calmness of tone.

"That nothing will be destroyed?"

"Nothing," said Laura.

She laid her hands upon the book, as if to guard its contents against all the world.

"My errand is done," said Aventayle, "and it will be my apology for my intrusion." He was about to go, when she took his hand.

"You have come in all kindness," she said in a low voice, and with agitation, "and you ought not to be sent away with the thoughts that I know are in your mind. But bear with me, Mr. Aventayle. You cannot know what the day has brought to me. Have you any children?"

"Indeed, yes," said Aventayle, "God bless them!"

"Then you *can* understand—but I must not talk to you so," she said, trying to smile as tears forced their way—"I have no right to talk to you. Only, if you had seen a black wall rise between you and those children, and day by day grow stronger and blacker, shutting you away from them for ever, and then there suddenly came to you—we have such things in dreams,"—and again she tried to smile, "a hope that the wall was crumbling away—you would know how to bear with a mother whose heart was nearly breaking, but who believes that the black wall is coming down. God bless you, and thank you for bringing me Charles's message, but there is no fear of what he seems to fear—assure him of that."

Again she held out her hand, and he pressed it and went down.

"A word, my good girl," said Aventayle, when he found himself with Henderson. "Did I understand aright that Mrs. Lygon had been informed of the dreadful thing that has happened to-day?"

"Silvain told you so, sir, did he not?"

"Yes."

"He was right to tell you so, but it is not true."

"What do you mean?"

"We did not dare. And she thinks at this moment that it is Adair who has been killed."

"I thought it must be so. Keep the truth from her until her present excitement is over. I thought it must be so. Mr. Hawkesley shall come up as soon as he can leave the house. By all means keep the truth from her."

The police had examined the whole building, and had easily detected the mode by which Ernest Adair had entered. They found the traces of his feet, and those of the unmistakeable foot of Urquhart, but in the mould of the bed between the wall and the window, they also discovered the marks of a third person's tread. The shoes had been well made, but must have been those of an artisan or other member of the humbler class of society. This fact remained to be explained, and was much debated by the police.

There had been but two men who could have explained it, and one of them could bear no more witness in this world.

The other was a mechanic who had mingled in the crowd, had remained in it, but silently, during all the proceedings, and had spoken but once.

That was when Silvain, having listened to the charges which were so wildly advanced, and to the strange story of the spirit, had indignantly broken out with his declaration that he who had been slain was good and noble.

"He was both," said the man with a deep oath. "And he has died by the hand of one whose head is the due of the executioner. God willing, the debt shall be paid."

The people looked at him strangely, and he went away.

CHAPTER XX.

It was late in the night, and the moonlight again lay upon Versailles, and Laura was at her window.

Her brother-in-law would see her early in the morning.

Versailles had long been silent, and the only sounds that came upon the ear of the watcher were the calm voices of the bells that told the hours, and the occasional sweep of the wind through the silvered trees. And little she heeded either, for her thoughts were of the same hour in an English home, and of children in the deep still sleep of happiness.

How long she had sat at that window, she knew not. But she believed herself to be standing near the little bed of her youngest child, and softly drawing back the clustered hair from his forehead, when she heard her name uttered, and she was again at the foliaged window of her house of exile.

Startled, first, and then with a shudder that agitated her whole being, Laura made a faint effort to reply, but the word died upon her lips, and she became stone-cold with terror.

For she knew the voice but too well.

"You are there, I can see you," said Ernest Adair, distinctly, but not aloud.

But Laura could neither answer, nor make a sign, nor obey the instinct that bade her draw away from the window.

"You hear me but you will not reply," he said, "It is not needful. You have the victory, and you have deserved it. But go to England, or your triumph will be useless. You hear me, go to England."

Her hand had lain among the foliage, and an involuntary movement detached a leaf, and it fell.

"I understand you," said Adair. "That is a sign that you hear, and will obey my counsel. Lose no time, for death is busy among us. Farewell."

He picked up the leaf, but she did not see the action, and she heard no more. Henderson found her on the bed, when morning brought the faithful attendant to the room, and Laura was lying near the wall, and with her hands tightly clasped over her eyes, as if to shut out some horrible image. Yet she had slept, thanks to the overmastering excitement of the past day, and she woke, pale as ashes, and distressingly prostrated, but in full possession of self-consciousness.

In a few minutes, however, she sprang up, hastened to the drawer where she had placed the volume of letters so strangely obtained, and hurried from the chamber, which she would not enter again.

A small room on the lower floor was hastily arranged for her, and here she awaited the arrival of Charles Hawkesley.

Laura spoke not, and Henderson attended her with silent assiduity, placed before her food which the girl had to remove untasted, and performed such few offices of the toilette as Laura would bear.

"Stay in the room," were almost the only words that Mrs. Lygon uttered, and they were said in a tone of entreaty, all unlike her usual calm voice of gentle command. The girl stood and watched her, and counted the minutes until Hawkesley came.

Then, relieved from her guard, Henderson fled from the room and from the house. For her own inferior class of courage had fairly broken down, and she dreaded to be near Mrs. Lygon when the discovery of the truth should be made. Yet, true to her self-imposed duty, she lingered near the door, and expected to see Mr. Hawkesley rush out and hastily summon her to the aid of her mistress.

No such hasty summons came.

More than an hour passed from the time at which Hawkesley had entered the room. Then Laura herself appeared at the door of the house, beckoned Henderson in, gave her orders to come on to Paris, to an address in the writing of Mr. Hawkesley, and soon afterwards left the house with her brother-in-law.

The girl watched them as they went away, and observed that Laura kept her eyes upon the ground. This of course Henderson did not understand.

Nor did Charles Hawkesley. For, informed by Aventayle that the truth had not been told to Laura, Hawkesley had resolved to continue to withhold it, until Mrs. Lygon had been removed from Versailles. It was his intention to conduct her to Paris, and then, if she would be guided by him, to escort her to England. But, in the meantime, he had the last duties to perform to him who had died in the house at Versailles.

They reached Paris, and on the way Charles Hawkesley explained to Laura that he wished her to remain there for two days, after which he proposed to take her to England. In the meantime he would place her in a lodging where she would be entirely freed from intrusion by friend or enemy.

"Have I an enemy?" said Laura, in a low voice.

He understood her, but made no direct reply. She gave a silent assent to the arrangement he proposed, and he drove with her to the lodging he had decided on, gave all directions for her comfort, and a special and private order that on no account should either French or English journals be brought to her. Then he took an affectionate leave of her, promising an early return, and left her, thoughtfully sending in a few books in the

hope that Laura might avail herself of the poor yet not altogether unavailing distraction which any attempt at diversion of the current of the mind from its course of sorrow will sometimes bring to the weary.

But he might have spared this care. In another hour Laura was on the road to England.

CHAPTER XXI.

CHARLES HAWKESLEY hastened to the bureau of M. ——, and, early as it was, he found that official in attendance.

"I suppose that I have nothing to tell you," said Hawkesley.

"Nothing," replied M. ——, with a manifestation of sincere sorrow—with a regret that was not a mere manifestation. "The past is past, and nothing so sad has chanced within my memory. I will not afflict you with my sympathy, Mr. Hawkesley, but be assured that I, too, have a right to be afflicted at the death of a brave, good man. I honoured him much, and when the time comes I may be able to prove to you that I have not used mere words of custom in saying this. It is more to the purpose that I should speak of the future."

"The necessary formalities—"

"Must be strictly observed, of course, but shall be performed with every delicacy and rapidity. You will desire to charge yourself with the details of the funeral. I will send to you a person who will make this duty as light as possible—who will carry out all your directions with perfect intelligence."

"I thank you, M. ——. And now, has the murderer been arrested?"

"I am to conclude that you fix the deed upon one person only?"

"Have we not ample proof?"

"Of that we shall have to speak hereafter. But, be this as it may, the man Adair will be seized in due course. Up to within the last hour he had not been captured."

"Surely it is impossible that he should escape?"

"I have seen such escapes that I am resolved to call nothing impossible to a clear-headed and resolute man, but I cannot doubt that we shall secure him, if it is desired."

"If it is desired!" echoed Hawkesley, astounded.

"I have, I see, given you a new thought, Mr. Hawkesley," said M. ——. "Do not reject it, however, merely because it has surprised you."

"Surprised is no word for what you cause in my mind."

"Listen, nevertheless, and once more let me beg you to believe in my assurance that I am profoundly grieved at what has chanced."

"You have used that word twice."

"It was accidentally, then, but we need not pause upon that. Mr. Hawkesley, I believe that if I resolve to capture this man Adair, I shall have him. Whether I do so shall depend upon your own decision, and that I will not ask you to give hastily. In the meantime, beyond a certain *cordon*, Ernest Adair shall not pass. If you, on

consideration, call for his arrest, it shall be made. But I am prepared to give you a stronger proof of my regard for the memory of him who is gone than you perhaps can appreciate. If you decide that it will be better for Ernest Adair to escape, that escape shall not be impossible."

"The assassin!"

"I will not try to enforce my own view by any of the lesser arguments which have occurred to me. I will not urge on you that we have no proof of the origin of the final quarrel that ended so miserably—that the probabilities are all against its having been provoked by the weaker man and not by the stronger—that French juries have sometimes a strange tenderness for a scoundrel whose history can be mixed up with a sentimental story like that of Adair's. I will suppose that he has committed wilful murder, and that he will be found guilty of it and executed. What is now a mystery, save among a few relatives, and among some officials who are as mute as the tomb, will then become common scandal in Paris and London. It is not my duty—on the contrary, it is far away from my duty—to place this consideration before you; but I loved your friend, and I take all the consequences of setting all this before you."

"It does not weigh with me, M. ——," said Hawkesley. "Justice demands that the miscreant who betrayed my dear friend's honour, and who has taken his life, should come out on a French scaffold, and die."

"You speak of justice, but you mean vengeance. But that is a common confusion of thought."

"Let it be so," said Hawkesley, sternly. "I would myself stand by and see the wretch's head fall."

"Do you think that I do not share your indignation? But is there not a higher duty than the gratification of a just revenge? Will you resolve on proclaiming to the world that the noble-minded Urquhart was a dishonoured man?"

"He was not dishonoured," returned Hawkesley. "An honourable man is robbed, but the deed of the scoundrel who pillages him does him no dishonour, and the crime of a bad man and a bad woman inflicts no shame upon the memory of Robert Urquhart. He suffered a great misfortune, and we will punish the villain who inflicted it."

"Come and say this to me in six hours, and I will act upon what you say. But there will be one thing more for you to consider. Were the name and fame of Urquhart alone involved, and as he has happily left no children to bear the brand of disgrace, specially no daughter whose husband the world will call a bold man, there might be nothing more to say, and I would telegraph that Adair should be at once arrested. But the subject of our interviews in this room, Mr. Hawkesley, has not been the misfortune of Urquhart, but of another equally honourable man, whose reputation you were still more eager to protect."

"Lygon. I have thought of that," said Hawkesley.

"You could not fail to think of it. But have you considered well what must inevitably happen if this criminal procedure continues? Do you think that Adair on his trial will be more reserved than Adair in this room? Will he, in view of the guillotine, respect the name of your sister?"

"Do you not know that we have seized the letters, M. ——, the villain's proofs, as he calls them?"

M. ——'s well-trained features gave no sign that he was hearing news. But he said:

"I learn this for the first time, Mr. Hawkesley, and I own it to you with perfect frankness. Others will have to explain how it is that I hear it first from you. But accept my admission as another proof that I am acting loyally by you. Who has the letters?"

"Mrs. Arthur Lygon."

"That, then, was the packet which you carried when she left the terminus with you, and you drove away to the lodging. They should have known better than to describe it as—as a dressing case," said M. ——, taking up a scrap of paper that lay beside him. "It is in Mrs. Lygon's possession, of course?"

"Yes, and he will be a shrewd man who gets it from her keeping."

"We are on grave business, and it is not worth while for me to invite you to come in three hours

and see it on this table," said M. ——. "Let it remain in the poor lady's keeping—she clings to it doubtless as a sheet anchor. Yet will your possession of it prevent scandal? Will not Adair rejoice in describing its contents, and in challenging you to produce the letters?"

"Who will believe a miscreant and assassin?"

"The world, which always believes the worst. And, besides, the letters are inextricably mixed up with the case. It is impossible that the treacherous revelations of Adair can be checked, if he is once arrested, unless, of course," added M. ——, with no affectation of coolness, but in the tone of remonstrance which he had hitherto employed, "unless he should be permitted to evade a trial by placing himself beyond the reach of this world's justice. Of this I fear there is no chance. He will have leisure in confinement to calculate the odds too well. He would be a fool to destroy himself. If he lives, he will reveal the double mystery which has come into his keeping."

"How was it," said Hawkesley, with a passionate oath, "that Urquhart failed to crush the very life out of him!"

"Ay," repeated the other, "it was strange. So strange that those may be pardoned who believed that the issue which has happened would be impossible, and therefore left events to take their course."

"What do you mean?"

"No matter. I will tell you another time.

Now, will you leave me? You have a melancholy occupation before you, and that claims your first attention. I will send to you as I have said, a man whom you can trust. Afterwards, Mr. Hawkesley, give your best consideration to all that I have said. Remember, I am counselling you neither way, but I am setting the whole case before you, and I am ready to act as your calm judgment may decide. You have before your eye a grim picture of a merited punishment. We may never be able to realise it. But, Mr. Hawkesley, even if we should, shall we have done what is best and kindest? It is a good sight to see a scoundrel's head fall where it can plot crime no more, but it is a better sight to see a loving woman restored to the arms of her little children. Choose which picture you will have, and come to me again. And I swear to you that nothing shall be lost by your taking time for consideration."

"He will not escape?"

"Nothing shall be lost."

At this moment a signal was given that a subordinate had something to communicate, and the drawer in the wall gave M. —— another scrap of paper. He read it quickly.

"Stay, Mr. Hawkesley," he said. "I have something for you. Do you know that Mrs. Lygon is now at the Northern Railway, about to depart for England?"

"It is impossible!" exclaimed Hawkesley.

"It is true—read for yourself."

And he handed across the scrap of paper, which contained the information he had given.

"What does this mean?" said Hawkesley, bewildered.

"She is alone, you observe."

"Alone, too."

"That is of no consequence. And she had better return alone than in the society in which she came over to France."

"You put a thought into my head. What if that fiend is again upon her track?"

"Be calm," said M. ——, laying his hand on Hawkesley's arm. "I give you my word of honour that Ernest Adair is within four miles of the house at Versailles. He had nothing to do with her journey."

"If he appears before her he will kill her," said Hawkesley.

"He will not appear before her, I tell you, and why should he attempt a new violence? Ah, the letters!"

"No, I do not mean that, I do not mean that. We have not told her who has fallen—she believes that it is her enemy."

"Ah! And the world is now clear before her, and she rushes back to England fearlessly, the first moment that she is set free. A brave lady. You must not stop her, Mr. Hawkesley; we can do so of course, at the first station, on pretext that we want her as a witness, but it must not be. Let her go."

"Go—I am rejoiced that she has gone, though she might have trusted me with her intentions. But she is gone with a belief that *he* is dead, and when she learns the truth—"

"Yes, let us consider. That complicates her position, poor lady. And yet let her go. Mr. Hawkesley—may I ask you a question which implies the most offensive suggestion, and yet—"

"You would ask whether I believe her innocent. Yes, as God shall judge me."

"Then let her go home."

"I will not seek to stop her. *Can she have seen her husband?*"

"We will ascertain."

He wrote some lines, despatched them, and renewed the conversation.

"Have you, Mr. Hawkesley, informed Mr. Lygon of the truth? No, I know that you have not done so personally, for you passed the night at Versailles, but you may have written."

"I thought it better to entrust the mission to Mr. Aventayle, as I had little time to spare, and Mrs. Lygon was, of course, my first consideration."

"You sent him up; but has he discharged the duty?"

"I go from hence to the hotel."

"It might be well not to go without knowledge as to whether the lady has met her husband. Shall I ask you to wait?"

M. —— went out, and Hawkesley was left to revolve the question whether Urquhart should be

avenged, or Laura should be saved from a new peril.

But upon this occasion, he was not allowed very long to deliberate. M. —— came in to him with the double information that neither Mrs. Lygon nor Mr. Aventayle had seen Arthur. The former fact was stated, the second was equally clear, for Lygon had not opened the door of his room since the preceding night. It was not the business of the chief of the police to know how this had been ascertained, but his employé knew that the door in question opened outwards, and the rest of the evidence was simple enough.

"Then it will be my business to tell him," said Hawkesley.

"Yes," said M. ——, "and also, if I may suggest this, to ascertain his thoughts on the subject on which we have spoken."

"Possibly," said Hawkesley, thoughtfully.

"He is surely, of all persons, the most interested in the decision," said M. ——.

"It is true. When can I see you again, M. ——?" said Hawkesley, somewhat abruptly changing the immediate subject before them.

"Always. But do not hasten. I have told you that time is not of vital consequence. One thing more. You have sent the truth to England. Your friend Aventayle has telegraphed in your name."

"Yes, I begged him to do so."

"I mention it only because in the event of Mrs.

Lygon going to the house of her sister, the facts will at once become known to her."

"That is true," said Hawkesley, "and it did not occur to me."

"Why should it? You had intended to break the truth yourself to Mrs. Lygon."

"This is most painful!" exclaimed Charles Hawkesley, walking about the room in excitement. "Why did she not remain, as she promised?"

"I must not ask the reason of your vexation."

"Yes," replied Hawkesley, frankly, "it is this. I have desired my wife to tell the terrible news to her sister Bertha, who is now lying ill in my house. The scene will be a most sad and agitating one, and I did not think of causing my wife the second affliction of having to make the revelation to Mrs. Lygon, who will hasten to her with the belief in which she has left Paris."

"Your concern at this moment is for your own wife."

"Certainly it is. Does it appear strange to you?"

"Do not speak with irritation. I was plotting how to meet this new trouble, Mr. Hawkesley. There is a way, of course, but to adopt it would be to stop Mrs. Lygon in her journey."

"What is it?"

"I could easily cause the truth to be told to her at Boulogne, or at Folkestone—or perhaps—yes, I will undertake to let it meet her on her arrival in London."

"No. I will not cross her path with another grief. If she goes to her sister's, let her learn the truth there. No one will tell it her more gently, or advise her more wisely."

"This is for yourself to decide. Should you think differently some hours hence, there will still be time to interpose."

"I will now go to the hotel."

"To remain there, if you will, until a person comes to you from me. After you have dismissed him, it will be for you, Mr. Hawkesley, and for your brother-in-law, to decide on the very grave consideration which I have taken the liberty of suggesting."

"Grave, indeed," muttered Hawkesley, as he went out, "and I find myself exchanging smooth words over the question whether an infernal murderer and villain shall escape us. It is like a dream—it is like a dream."

CHAPTER XXII.

CAUTIOUSLY and thoughtfully as the telegraphic message, dispatched by Aventayle to Mrs. Hawkesley at the request of her husband, had been worded, in order to soften as far as possible the epigrammatic curtness of such messages, and to do away with the startling effect which the hardness of the official hand, in lieu of that wont to be so welcome, produces upon those unaccustomed to such communications, there was still the cruel fact which no care could render less cruel. Beatrice learned that her husband's valued friend, the husband of the feeble woman on the sick bed above, had been stricken down in his strong manhood, and that her weak sister was a widow. Shocking as was the news, melancholy as was the thought that he concerning whom it was sent had been the subject if not of harsh judgment, of suspicion and mistrust on the part of Beatrice when she last wrote, it was far more shocking to her when she came to recal the circumstances under which he and Bertha had parted for ever, and the nature of the revelation which it became her duty to make to the scarcely penitent creature who manifested so inadequate a sense of her sin, so vague a dream of her future.

For herself, Mrs. Hawkesley, with some self-

reproach, owned that horror had more share than actual grief in the sensations with which she had to struggle. That she had never thoroughly liked, perhaps had never thoroughly appreciated Urquhart, has been made clear in an earlier part of our story. The negative feelings with which she had regarded him had been altered into something almost resembling hatred by the circumstances which have been told. Chiefly had his unhesitating judgment on Laura, his imperative demand that Lygon should be convinced of her worthlessness on the strength, not of evidence examined by himself, but of testimony that had been conclusive to Urquhart, confirmed Beatrice in her hostile feelings towards him, nor had they been softened by the effect which Robert Urquhart's sentence had produced upon the mind of her own husband. She was the best of wives, and not the less so that she had the genuine wifely belief that the best of husbands submit to few influences save those of home. Beatrice, therefore, was well prepared to be impressed, even by the careless and non-consequent tales of Bertha, and at the moment of the arrival of the despatch she had no inclination to retract a syllable of the imputations which she had conveyed to her husband.

Then came the telegraph message, and Urquhart was gone, and that strange revulsion, which the head cannot justify, and which the heart cannot refuse, that disposition to see only what was good in those who are no longer with us for good or for evil, followed, and Beatrice's affectionate nature was more

afflicted than she could have imagined possible from aught connected with the stern, rough Urquhart. Before she could give herself up to the task of breaking the news to her sister, Mrs. Hawkesley had her own self-rebuke—remorse were too strong a word—to deal with, and it was with a doubly sorrowful heart that she addressed herself to the thought how she might in the gentlest manner open to Bertha the tidings that he whom she had so wickedly wronged was beyond the reach of her penitence.

"Aunt, I wish you would not have letters," said little Fred Lygon, who had stolen into the room where Beatrice, not heeding him, was once more reading the message.

"Do you, darling?" said his aunt, too accustomed to the ways of childhood to be startled at any child-appearance from any quarter in which playfulness could reveal itself. "Why, dear Fred?"

"Because letters make you look ugly. Tell the postman not to bring any except they come from mamma or papa."

She kissed the child, and went to her own room, whence, after some time, she passed across to Bertha's, with a tremor foreign to her usually calm nature.

"I thought that you were never coming any more," said Bertha, raising herself in the bed, and speaking fretfully.

"I have not been away long, dear," answered Beatrice, more gently, perhaps, than she would

have replied on another occasion. "I had a good many orders to give, and most of them were for you."

"It is more than an hour," persisted Bertha, "for I have heard the church clock strike twice; but you think that because I am ill in bed I must believe anything you like to tell me."

"My dear Bertha," said Mrs. Hawkesley, coming near her, "you cannot feel that you have been treated with any neglect here. I am sure that it has been a labour of love with us all to do all that we can for you."

"I am not complaining," retorted Bertha. "You are always finding fault with me, and I wish I were dead."

"Bertha," said her sister, very gravely, "do not speak lightly of death. It may be that you will hear of it sooner than you expect."

"Preaching does me no good, Beatrice, as you might know by this time. I am much obliged to you, of course, for all that you have done, and to Charles for having brought me home here, but what has happened has happened, and we cannot alter it by talking. I wish I were well enough to go away from you all, and not be a trouble and a shame to those who must hate me."

"You have no right to talk in this unkind manner, Bertha, dear. I think that you are stronger and better to-day, and I want to speak to you very seriously, but not in the way of preaching, as you call it, though I am sure you have not heard much that

deserves the name, and nothing that has not been meant affectionately."

"Give me some of the lemonade. It is not fresh, and it is quite warm, but it is good enough for me."

"Fresh is being made for you, dear. Now, can you listen to me for a few minutes, as I have something to say which you must hear."

"If I must I must, and it is of no use asking. I dare say that I am as well to-day as I shall be to-morrow."

"I have a letter from Paris, a very sad letter."

"What has happened?" said Bertha, eagerly. "He is not coming over after me—do not say that."

"Indeed he is not."

"You are quite certain?"

"Bertha, I have a message for you which you will remember to the last hour of your life," said Beatrice, desirous to bring her sister into a more fitting frame of mind to receive the fatal intelligence.

"It is of no use sending me reproaches. As soon as the doctor will let me, I will go away, and be out of the reach of you all."

"And where will you go, Bertha?"

"I do not know. I suppose Charles will advise me. I suppose that *he* will do something for me when he has calmed down, and will not let his wife be without the means of living."

"Whom do you mean by he?"

"Whom should I mean—my husband."

"You have no husband, Bertha."

"Beatrice," said Bertha, clutching at her sister's arm. "What do you mean? He has divorced me?"

"You are divorced indeed."

"But that is impossible. It is not true, Beatrice; you are saying it to work upon me. There are no divorces in France. I know that, though you think I know nothing. It is wicked of you to play upon my feelings."

"You are divorced for ever, Bertha. Mr. Urquhart is gone."

"Gone!"

"He is dead."

Mrs. Hawkesley turned away, that she might not see the agitation which she felt that her words must produce in the face of her sister. Beatrice even listened for the rapid breath, for the sob, but she heard nothing, and her immediate impression was that Bertha must have fainted. The next instant Beatrice was about to throw her arms round Bertha, but paused, so utterly different was the result of her words from that which she had expected.

Bertha was lying back on her pillow, but her cheek had not lost the fever flush, and her eyes, undimmed with tears, were even brighter than before. She was muttering something, but Mrs. Hawkesley was too much shocked to seek to hear what it was—and as she looked, the expression on her lip was assuredly not that of grief, and Beatrice struggled against the impression that it partook of an opposite character. There must have been seen in

Beatrice's face something of the indignation which she felt, or else Bertha's own conscience must have accused her of heartlessness, for she raised herself, and said, though in no tone befitting the occasion—

"It is very shocking. How did it happen, Beatrice?"

"Suddenly."

"Ah! He told me more than once, poor fellow, that he knew that it would be sudden when it came. Poor Robert!"

And she hid her face in her handkerchief, but when she withdrew it, there were no tears glistening on her cheek.

"It was sudden indeed, Bertha. He died a violent death."

"My God! One of his railway accidents—was it so, Beatrice?"

"He died by the hand of a murderer."

This time the face of Bertha became white indeed. The fearful news had found its way to her selfish heart, and in the agitation with which she clung to Beatrice there was no feigning.

"Don't tell me that. Say it is not so, and that you were only trying me?"

"Do you dare to think that I would speak falsely on such a matter? Bertha, your husband, your noble husband, has been killed in his own house, in the house that was yours until you left it of your own will."

"Do not speak to me so. I am too weak to bear it, I am indeed. Tell me—no, do not tell me until

I am stronger. He has been killed. Was it a robber that broke in—yes, tell me that and no more."

"He has been killed by the worst of robbers—by the man who robbed him of the heart of his wife."

Bertha gazed at her for a few moments, and then, with a sort of cry, said,

"You are speaking falsely to me after all. He is dead—yes, and he has died of a broken heart—say it is so."

"His heart was too proud to break for what you could do, Bertha," replied her sister. "He has been killed, I tell you, and the man who has killed him is Ernest Adair."

"Then Robert must have attacked him, and Adair must have acted in self-defence. It is very dreadful, but it must have been so, and every one has a right to defend himself. But it is very dreadful," she repeated, shrinking from under the kindled eye of her sister.

"It is dreadful," repeated Mrs. Hawkesley, slowly, "but not so dreadful as this. And your first impulse is to find an excuse for the murderer."

"No, no, I did not, I do not. I was only saying —how eager you are to judge me!—I was only saying how it must have been, for I remember that poor Robert declared he would one day be the death of Ernest."

"Of Ernest?" said Mrs. Hawkesley, bitterly. "Can you use the name as if—O! I cannot speak

to you, Bertha. May it please God to bring you to a fitter state of mind! I cannot speak to you. There is the telegram; read it if you please, and if you can, pray to be forgiven the fearful wickedness which has brought a good man to such a grave. Oh! Bertha, Bertha!"

And, weeping the only tears which had been shed at that interview, to which she had looked with so much agitation, Beatrice hastened from the room.

"What would she have had me say?" murmured Bertha, when she was alone. "Throw myself back in an agony, and declare that I loved him better than my life. I did not, and I will not say so."

CHAPTER XXIII.

When Mr. Berry left Mrs. Hawkesley, after the interview in which he had made his strange revelation, he went over to Canonbury Square, and sent in his name to her father.

Archibald Vernon was in his favourite position on a sofa drawn so comfortably near the window as that the light fell full upon his newspaper, while the curtain shaded him from the glare. He was, of course, in a morning robe and slippers, and the air from the opened sash played pleasantly with his soft white hair—once or twice he had permitted himself the fancy that he was somewhat in a draught, but having deliberately balanced the comparative inconvenience of moving, and that of enduring the slight breeze, he had decided in favour of bearing the latter until some one else should come in and close the window for him. And he was deep in the long-winded sentences of a President's Message.

Mr. Berry followed close upon the servant, and Mr. Vernon, though rather vexed at being interrupted so soon after breakfast, rose to receive him with the courtesy habitual to the man whom the world had used so ill.

"It is some years since we met, Mr. Vernon,"

said Berry, "but I need not recal myself to your recollection."

"My sojourn in Lipthwaite," replied Mr. Vernon, smiling, "was so pleasant, in many respects, that I am not likely to forget a Lipthwaite friend. Pray sit down."

And being on his feet, Mr. Vernon availed himself of the opportunity of closing the window.

"Have you read the Message?" he asked, pointing to the "Times." "It is singularly interesting."

"What message?" replied Mr. Berry. "Some telegraph?"

"The President's Message. We have been expecting it most anxiously for some days."

"Not I. I really forget who is President, and I am sure I did not know that he was going to issue a message. I suppose that it is all moonshine and verbiage, as usual?"

"I see you retain your old Tory notions," Mr. Berry," said Mr. Vernon. "We used to battle over them in Lipthwaite, you will remember. Do you recollect contending that the barren platitudes we call a speech from the throne were better than the well-reasoned and eloquent essay which a republican president addresses to the people?"

"I dare say that I did. I know that I should take the same side, if I cared enough about politics to discuss such matters now."

"Now, my dear sir! Why, politics now have a commanding interest, a grand importance which

they have never had before. Every event has its significance, and all events are tending to bring on a great and mighty change, a regeneration of mankind."

"Mankind wants regenerating, badly enough, but I don't suppose it will be done by Presidents' Messages and newspaper gabble. However, if such things amuse you, you are right enough to look after them. I shall not interrupt your studies very long, but I shall be glad of a little conversation with you."

"Nothing disagreeable, I hope?" said Mr. Vernon, with sincerity, and looking keenly at Mr. Berry.

"We are both of us too old to be afraid of disagreeable subjects," said Berry, who was in no mood to make allowances for the selfishness of his companion.

"The less time we have before us, the more pleasantly we should try to occupy it," said the other. "That is one of the pieces of wisdom which my white hairs have taught me. But, of course, if you feel that there is anything I ought to hear—though I would much rather it were put into writing—"

"I have been a lawyer, Mr. Vernon, and we write when we do not mean to come to the point. I shall not detain you long, and I cannot write what I wish to say."

With a wistful look at the paper, which Mr. Vernon knew would be called for in less than an hour, he begged Mr. Berry to proceed.

"I shall make no apologies to you, Mr. Vernon," said Berry, "for bringing a painful subject before you, for I am certain that as a father you will feel that none are needed."

"Painful," and "a father." The first word was a good deal stronger than "disagreeable," and the second called up a still more unpleasant train of recollections in the mind of Mr. Vernon. How he wished that he had gone out for the walk which he had always intended to take after his breakfast. But there he was, and there was no escape for him.

"None of my children ill?" he said.

"I suppose that, if so, it would hardly have been left to me to inform you."

"Nay, I did not know. Canonbury is a good way from my daughter Beatrice's, and Laura is still, I suppose, in some part of France. To tell you the truth, I do not see either of them quite so often as when we were all at Hermit Hut. But I am glad to hear you say that nothing is the matter."

"I said nothing of the kind, Mr. Vernon," said Berry, whose manner, formerly so genial, had become incisive and unpleasant. "Ill-health is not the worst thing that can come upon us."

"In my mind, the very worst, except perhaps poverty. I hope that, as a professional man, you do not come to tell me of any pecuniary misfortune."

And Archibald Vernon thought, uncomfortably, of the regularly paid rent for his very comfortable

board and lodging, and that a quarter would be due in a short time.

"No, sir. But I come to tell you of something that should affect you more than either of the misfortunes which you have mentioned. When I have told you, I shall leave it to you to act as you may think your duty dictates."

"To act," was another phrase that grated upon Vernon's organisation, but he had sufficient reliance upon his own powers of self-conviction to assure himself that it must indeed be a powerful cause that should drive him to any action more distasteful than writing a letter, or perhaps entering a series of protests in his private diary. So he listened with the composure which we feel when we have our destiny in our own hands.

It must be allowed that the tone of his companion was not one calculated to overcome the passive resistance of Mr. Vernon.

"You are a thinking man, Mr. Vernon," said Berry, almost sneeringly, "and, therefore, I address myself to your head, and not to your heart."

The speech was abrupt and offensive, and Vernon felt it, and said with some dignity:

"You will deliver your business in your own way, Mr. Berry. I trust that it may be less disagreeable than the manner in which you seem inclined to open it."

"I dare say that it will excuse any defect in manner, sir. I am too old to be very fastidious, and you are not, I take it, much my junior."

"I am unaware that we are ever too old to be courteous, Mr. Berry."

Mr. Berry looked at him for a moment, and might have intended to make a more harsh reply. But, after a pause, he said:

"Mr. Vernon, when you were in Lipthwaite, I had some opportunity of observing the mode in which you educated your children. I have a perfect recollection of having more than once made you aware that I did not think your system—if it deserved the name—was a proper one, or that it would be attended with happy results. I recollect, also, that though you were always prepared to debate the affairs of Europe, or of Madagascar, or any other place, with the utmost fulness, you showed a touchy impatience at hearing a word upon matters that really concerned you. On one occasion, the last, you met me with an answer that prevented my ever alluding to the topic again."

"It is years ago, Mr. Berry, and I do not remember the circumstance, but it was not unnatural that I should decline the advice of a gentleman who had no kind of right to offer it."

"I will not say that I had no kind of right, sir, for it happened that, at the time, I filled a public office in our town, and certain matters came under my knowledge, partly because of my filling that situation. But I used my own judgment, and I decided that I was not warranted in saying more to you than one acquaintance might say, in private friendship, to another. It might have been better

had I been less scrupulous, but that consideration is now beside the question. Let me go on to say that subsequent circumstances seemed to show that you had been more fortunate than I thought you deserved to be. Each of your daughters married, and married well, and appeared to lead a happy life. There was, therefore, no more to be said."

Mr. Vernon made no reply.

"I heartily wish," continued Berry, "that it had never been my fortune to hear again of any of the ladies, except that they continued to be good wives to the husbands whom they had been so fortunate as to secure."

"Mr. Berry," said Vernon, reddening, "I do not sit here to listen to anything implying that any husband whom a daughter of mine could marry was not at least as much honoured in the marriage as she could be."

"Those words and that look, Mr. Vernon, would well become a father who had fulfilled his duties to his children, instead of bringing them up with no care except what a day-school could afford, but from you they are simply vain and arrogant. Hear me out, sir. The politics of Europe, and of America," he added with a glance at the paper, "have engrossed your attention so much, that you have not had enough time for so unimportant a question as the position of your own children. A stranger, therefore, has to call upon you, and inform you that of the three children whom you brought up so well, and whose alliance did so much

honour to their husbands, one has disgraced her husband, and has fled from France to England to avoid his vengeance, and another has abandoned her home, and fled to Paris, and, as her husband has reason to believe, for the same cause that drove away her sister."

Archibald Vernon, who, at the outset of this brutal speech, had gazed fiercely at Berry, and seemed but to await its close in order to lay a violent hand upon him, turned suddenly pale as the last sentences were uttered, bowed his head into his hands, and broke into weeping.

Mr. Berry looked on with a cold eye.

"I have seen a good deal of suffering in my time," he said in an under-voice, and as he walked to the other end of the room, "but I never noticed that a man who cried suffered long."

And he compared his watch with the clock upon the mantelpiece.

"You have no doubt as to what you are telling me, I am sure," said Mr. Vernon, raising his head and speaking in a voice of distress.

"I wish for their sakes, and for that of their sister, that I had any doubt," said Berry, from the hearthrug.

"But—but," said Archibald Vernon, rising, and approaching him, "you have not mentioned a name. Which—which—is it Mrs. Urquhart?" he added, in a troubled whisper.

"Mrs. Hawkesley is in her house, and doing her duty," was Berry's indirect reply.

It were harsh to say that a ray of comfort shot through the mind of the father at this assurance—yet it was Beatrice who had the charge and care of his welfare, and it was to her that he turned in any of his small and self-made troubles—let it be said only that the news that his eldest child had gone would have grieved him more deeply than the fate of the others.

"And such is destiny," said Vernon, placing his handkerchief to his eyes, and returning to the couch, on which he threw himself in a despairing manner.

"Destiny!" repeated Berry, again glancing at his watch.

"I have nothing to reproach myself with, Mr. Berry," said Vernon, rising again after some minutes, during which his companion watched him calmly, and without a single word or sign of sympathy. "I repeat that I have nothing to reproach myself with. I acted upon my own conviction that I was pursuing a right course, and if circumstances over which I have had no control have brought grief and sorrow, I can only mourn, but I have no right to condemn the system on which I proceeded. Still, it is sad—most sad."

And again he covered his eyes with his hands.

"I will give him a quarter of an hour," said Berry, "to convince himself that all is well."

"Yes, Berry," said Mr. Vernon, in a melancholy tone, "I am cut to the very soul, but I will not be untrue to my principles. Poor girls, poor girls.

The fault is not with me. I am not responsible—deeply, profoundly as I feel the grief. You have differed from me, Berry, as to the mode in which children should be educated, but you will do me the justice to own that I adhered sedulously and conscientiously to my system. I held, and I hold still, that the heart of a child is the flower-garden which it is not for man to lay out according to his own presumptuous fancies—"

"But he should leave it to the devil to sow tares in," said Berry, roughly.

"The devil," said Vernon, raising his hand in deprecation of its being supposed that he believed in such a being, though he was then in too much distress to argue the question. "We have thought differently, my dear Berry, and your views now seem to be triumphant. Poor Laura, poor Bertha!"

"He is comforting, fast," muttered Berry.

"I have not been to blame, I solemnly declare," said Archibald Vernon. "I have sacrificed myself, indeed, and my opportunities, for my children. It was in compliance with the will of narrow-minded relatives, who meant, I am sure for the best, but who were bigoted beyond description, that I buried myself for years in Lipthwaite, where my talents were unavailable, and I could take no part in the great questions of the day. I went further, and if there be any blame attaching to me, it is in this, that I yielded to the will of those relatives, and for the sake of the comforts which their money gave to my dear ones, I permitted them to go to

the school in your town. I might have done better to have kept them at home. Yet I am conscious that if I yielded, it was for their sakes, and that I never compromised my own belief that it is not for us to seek to form the natures and characters of one another. Had they not, dear things, gone to that school, they might have been saved from this grief and evil."

And amid all his feeble folly, Vernon unwittingly spoke the truth in these last words.

"He is consoled," said Berry, once more looking at his watch. "And it is under the time. So much for tears."

"You bear this heavy blow well and manfully," said Mr. Berry, "and I was right in saying that I would appeal to your head, not your heart."

But either the tone, or some instinct of nature, made this speech unpleasing to Mr. Vernon, and he turned away in silence.

"I will waste little time on him," said Mr. Berry, contemptuously.

He read the man, but it was in the coarse way, that takes no account of the foot-notes and marginal readings. Those who, early in our story, learned to know Vernon better, will perhaps have fuller knowledge of him. But that weak and superficial nature (inherited by his second child, Bertha, but in her case made painfully frivolous by the want of intellect, and made actively selfish by a feebler organisation than his own) was of the class which beyond most others excites the scorn and hate of a busy

practical mind. Judge Vernon by what we know of him, but do not judge Berry for knowing less.

"I have broken the news abruptly to you, Mr. Vernon," he said, "for with such a story in one's mouth, it is difficult to frame one's lips to delicate language, and when one speaks to a man of resolution and character, the sooner one's news is broken the better. But I beg your pardon if I have been hasty, and I will only say that if you knew what cause of sorrow I have in my own household, you would not be angry that I have few words to spare for the troubles of others."

Mr. Vernon had waved his hand slightly as Mr. Berry began, but, as he concluded, Vernon came up to him, and placed his hand in Berry's.

"You, too, are in affliction?"

"I have left a wife who is, I believe, dying."

"Ah, my friend," said Vernon, "I too, have known that sorrow. But it came to me when such blows are bitterer."

"I do not wish to speak of my own grief," said Mr. Berry, "but you will remember it when you recal this conversation. But to return to your own family affairs."

"I have heard enough for one sad day," said Vernon, seating himself with one hand on the end of the couch, and with his handkerchief shading his eyes.

"But you must hear me out, Mr. Vernon," replied Berry, "for it is not probable that we shall meet again, and I have something to add."

"You have no new sorrow to tell me—surely I have nothing to hear that will add to my sufferings?"

"You have asked me for no details, Mr. Vernon."

"Nay, spare me those. I could not bear them. It is enough to know the terrible truth."

"But you have imperfectly listened to what I said, or you would have been eagerly questioning me. I said that in the case of one unhappy person, there was—there were circumstances that would make any action on your part, or that of the family, worse than useless. But in the case of your youngest child you could not have heard me say that there is only a belief that she has forgotten her duty."

"Did you say that? I was so stunned by the first intelligence that I did not catch your words. Pray—pray explain."

"Without going into needless detail, accept this as a fact. Mrs. Lygon fled from her home, but it was partly to obtain the possession of certain letters, of which a dreadful use has been made. Mr. Hawkesley and Mr. Lygon are also in Paris, and they are endeavouring to get at those letters. If they or Mrs. Lygon obtain them, the first impulse will be to destroy them with all their foulness and treachery. If that be done, your child's happiness is gone. Will you believe this from me?"

"Unquestionably. I have known you long, and as a man of honour."

"You believe this without asking more questions?"

"Fully."

"And you love your child."

"Love my own Laura!"

"And you have influence with her?"

"As much as a loving father can have. My youngest child, and perhaps my favourite, though dear Beatrice—"

"You have influence with Mrs. Lygon—pardon my abruptness."

"I have indeed, I hope."

"Then do not lose an hour, but go over to Paris as fast as possible, and see her, Lygon, and Hawkesley, and impress upon them with all the force in your possession that they must bring those letters to England. Do not wait to understand why—you will understand that too well when all is explained, but go at once—go by to-night's train, and help to save your child."

"By to-night's train!" repeated Mr. Vernon, aghast.

"Yes, for a train lost may lose the object, and you will then repent the delay to the last hour of your life."

"I am in no state to travel," said Mr. Vernon, dropping each hand by his side, and looking exceedingly wretched. "Night travelling too. Besides," he added, instinctively feeling that he needed some other justification, "I must see my daughter, Mrs. Hawkesley. I must consult and deliberate with

her, and ascertain her convictions as to the propriety of this course."

"I come direct from her, and she begs and implores that you will hurry off to Paris."

This was said so emphatically, that Mr. Vernon received the announcement in helpless dismay.

"But Paris," he stammered, "that is a wide direction—"

"The exact directions are written down on this paper."

"This is most extraordinary. I really feel that I must have time for reflection."

"You have said that you fully believe all I have told you, and that you have influence with Mrs. Lygon, and your daughter Beatrice urgently entreats you to go—you speak of self-sacrifice for the sake of your children, and I am sure that you will not hesitate when you see what vital interests are concerned."

"I would do anything—that is—anything that is reasonable"—said the now thoroughly unhappy Vernon. "But surely a letter—if I were to write to her—it would arrive at the same time, and it would be kinder to her, and more delicate. It would be painful to her to meet her father's eye under the circumstances, and clearly it seems to me that a strong letter—I will write it immediately—"

"It would not reach her, and all will be lost. You, on the contrary, will be with her in a few hours."

"If there were no other difficulty," said Mr. Vernon, "and I see many objections which must be removed before I admit that there is no other, the journey is a long one, and it so happens that—"

"There are twenty pounds, in sovereigns," said Mr. Berry, placing a packet on the sofa beside Mr. Vernon. "You have only to call at this address for a pass, which will be given as a matter of course, and you have nearly all the day before you."

"But my preparations?" said Vernon, feebly, for he felt heartily ashamed of his attitude of resistance, and yet could by no means bring his mind to the idea that in a few hours from that time he should, of his own will, order a conveyance, and depart for France.

"Preparations—for a night's journey? Take nothing, and get what you want in Paris. The train leaves London Bridge—there, I have written down the exact hour for you. I will say no more. If you go, you may save your daughter—if you do not, believe that it is destiny that has destroyed her, and see what kind of comfort that thought will be upon your death-bed. Do something to atone for the system of neglect that has brought about such misery."

He went out as he spoke. And he had better have left the last words unspoken. For Archibald Vernon was ever one of those who think more of words than things, and who think last words of more significance than the first.

Vernon echoed that last sentence, and pondered upon it, and the longer he did so the more comfort it brought him in his present trouble. Not for the trouble, not the sorrow that the tidings of Berry had caused—for those he had an ample recognition, and they were to be considered and deplored in due course—but his own immediate exigency now demanded all his thought. Before Berry had left, Mr. Vernon had fully resolved that he would write, at all events, before thinking of moving—but how to justify this to himself? He had nearly succeeded, by dint of the hundred objections to action which ever spring to the aid of one who seeks them—when the charge of Beatrice, the direct, urgent charge of the daughter who chiefly ministered to his own comforts came upon him, and he had almost yielded to the belief that he should depart on the errand.

But Berry's last words came to save him.

"'Atone for the system of neglect that has brought about such misery,'" he repeated once more. "How dares he, how dares any man speak thus of the convictions of another? This man, of all, whose whole life has been given to the coarse and selfish prosecution of a pursuit for which there would actually be no place at all, were society what it should be. First, a hard and greedy lawyer, and then, when I knew him, the puppet-official of a miserable borough, a man who blustered at the poor, and fawned upon the rich, and made his gain by it, building himself a house, and buying the land

of some client whom he had oppressed into selling it. That man dares to come to me, and in my own room to tell me that my system has brought my children to wrong. And am I to bow to his bidding, and hurry to Paris as if I were his clerk? No. I will not stoop to that humiliation; and dear Beatrice, though she may be angry at first, will own that I was right to vindicate myself. This money is, of course, hers, and I will return it the first time I can get over to Maida Hill. But I will write to Laura—and to make sure that she receives the letter, I will send a copy to Charles and to Arthur. That will be the most prompt and secure method of acting. Dear Beatrice wishes me to go, but her busy mind has not had time to comprehend the delicacy of Laura's position. Beatrice does not, at the moment, see how painful it would be for Laura to meet my eye, but will feel this when I explain the reasons for my course. I will go over to her the first thing to-morrow—or rather, I will write and tell her what I have done, and ask her to come to me, and take away her money. That is clearly my course, and I regret that Berry left the house before I had time to announce to him what it should be. I will, however, write to him also, in a few days, perhaps when I receive a reply from Paris. A coarse, greedy, ignorant man—yet useful enough in his way, I doubt not. Poor Bertha, poor dear child. I should like to hear her own story of her life. When the fitting time comes, I will ask her to send it me—that vulgar lawyer has but one word

for every shade of error, and who is he that he should judge a gentle, sensitive woman?"

Many more reflections of this kind occupied Archibald Vernon. Did he deceive himself, or did he endeavour to do so? One would not decide. But as the letters for France could not depart till the evening, a reader will scarcely be surprised at hearing that, after a sigh for the sad things that had come upon his family, Mr. Vernon read to the end of the American Message, or that the letters required too much consideration to be dispatched that day. What the father had been in his youth, he proved in his age.

Mr. Berry had no further business in London, and yet he seemed in no haste to leave it. He chose to walk from Canonbury to the city, although a young walker must have stepped out well to save the next train for Lipthwaite, and although there was not another until late in the day. Yet we have heard what he told Mrs. Hawkesley of one whom he had left at home—we have heard him repeat to Vernon that a dying wife lay there, and he had spoken the truth.

He went through the formality of entering the station, and of looking at the clock and time-bills, and seeing that he had missed the train. He then took careful note of the next departure, and went out. And the old man turned back into the old city, and wandered aimlessly through the narrow and quaintly-named streets and lanes, sometimes standing still with no apparent object, sometimes

watching the sturdy labourers, as they loaded or unloaded carts, and sometimes following with his eye the slow ascent of huge sacks to the hooded doors of the warehouses—but Mr. Berry could have given but poor account why he had stood still, or what he had seen. But he wandered on, and twice crossed the river, by different bridges, and lingered so long upon the lonely arches of one of these that he became an object of interest to an officer on duty, who watched him so sedulously that even Berry himself became aware that he was dogged.

"You seem to know me," he said at last to the policeman.

"Well, no, sir," said the officer, whose shrewdness told him that the stranger was eminently respectable up to that moment, whatever might be his views for the future; "but don't you find it rather hot, walking about here so long together?"

"It is hot, is it?" said Mr. Berry.

"I would not walk here, if I had no call to it," replied the officer.

"Ah! if you had no call to it," repeated Mr. Berry, mechanically. "Well, perhaps I have no call to it."

"Then I would get in the shade, off the bridge, sir."

"In the shade, off the bridge. I dare say that you are quite right. When *you* come off the bridge here is something to help to cool you."

He put a shilling into the hand of the man, and walked away, but the present, though not unaccepted,

did not prevent the officer from following pretty closely, as if to be ready should the suspected man take his advice, and suddenly place himself in the shade and off the bridge by a spring from the parapet. Once through the gate, and Berry's life would be in charge of some other initial and number.

But Mr. Berry had no such thought as that which entered the mind of the officer, and he returned to Lipthwaite by the afternoon train.

Every one about the station knew him, and he imagined that more than one person who would, ordinarily, have addressed, or at least recognised him, seemed to keep out of his way. This idea took stronger possession of him when, in a street leading to the station, a gentleman with whom he was rather intimate crossed over, and thus avoided speech, although saluting Berry as they passed.

"It has happened," he said, "and they don't want to tell me."

He walked out less rapidly in the direction of his house, with that strange sensation which we experience when making our way to a scene in which we are to meet a new expression on every face around us.

At the gate of his house was the carriage of the medical man who was in attendance on Mrs. Berry.

"Is he still here? I am too late—and too soon."

But as he opened the gate, the doctor came from the house, and shook hands with him.

"Well, we are low, but not more so than yesterday," said the medical man, in answer to Berry's look. "There is great persistency, great persistency."

Mr. Berry did not ask for an explanation of the word, but manifested evident relief.

"I had feared to hear a worse account," he said. "My visit to town was on the most urgent business, as you may imagine."

"Certainly, certainly. And this kind of thing may continue a long time, and yet may be abruptly terminated. There is no new symptom to-day. But I want to say a word to you," he added, they being within hearing of his servant. "Just take a turn with me in the shrubbery. She is sleeping now, so that you could not go up. Just a word."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE boat from Boulogne to Folkestone was loosed from her moorings, and was beginning her way between the piers of the harbour.

Laura was on board.

She had gone down into the cabin from an instinct that made her avoid heedless observation, rather than with any view of concealment, and she designed to come on deck again as soon as the vessel should be well on her course. In her hand, from which it never seemed to part, was a large packet, carefully sealed, and directed, to provide against any possible accident, with the address of Mr. Hawkesley. But the care which Mrs. Lygon bestowed upon her charge seemed to render it in the highest degree improbable that it would escape from her keeping.

To the surprise of the few passengers below, the vessel suddenly slackened speed, which it did not resume.

Three or four hurried on deck, to ascertain the cause of the delay, but Mrs. Lygon remained below, almost alone.

She quietly waited the resumption of the voyage, attributing the delay to some casual obstruction, when the steward entered the cabin, and spoke to the only two persons who were in it, besides Mrs.

Lygon. They looked a little surprised, but with much docility obeyed the man's invitation to come out with him.

Laura was alone. The next moment there entered a tall gentleman in plain clothes, who advanced towards her, raised his hat, and in English, but with a slight accent, begged to know whether he had the honour of addressing Mrs. Lygon.

Somewhat tremulously, Laura replied in the affirmative.

"In that case, I have also the honour of bearing a message to Mrs. Lygon."

He handed to her a telegraphic dispatch. It was from Charles Hawkesley. And it said,

"*Have no hesitation in handing to the bearer what he will ask from you. It is absolutely necessary. Fear nothing.*"

"Does the message explain itself, Madame?"

"I know the name of Mr. Hawkesley," replied Laura.

"He instructs me to ask you for a packet. By the description in the message to myself"—and he produced another paper—"I should judge that the packet beside Madame is the one in question."

Laura's treasure—her sheet anchor—her last hope! No. She steadily refused compliance, and the stranger, with slight attempt to change her resolve, bowed and departed. On went the vessel, and Laura held her treasure fast when she wistfully gazed on the white cliffs of England.

CHAPTER XXV.

YET Laura might have safely and discreetly surrendered the volume to the applicant on board the boat. For he was not, as she naturally suspected, a hostile emissary, but an agent who had been employed at the desire of Charles Hawkesley, and by concert between him and the chief of the police. They had better reasons for the precaution than she could imagine.

Hawkesley, on returning from the bureau, after hearing the views of M. ——, had gone to the apartment of Arthur Lygon, and had apprised him of the catastrophe at Versailles.

Rarely has terrible news wrought such a change in the hearer as did these tidings cause in the hitherto impassive Lygon. He had listened in the calmest silence to the short introduction by which Hawkesley sought to approach the subject without undue abruptness, and had waited steadily for the narrative of the issue of the conflict; but when his brother-in-law announced that Urquhart was no more, the eyes of Lygon suddenly lighted up, his face reassumed its long-lost expression of determination and self-reliance, and—it was a small trait, but characteristic of the man—he rose and

gave a brief, business-like glance at the mirror, as if to satisfy himself that he was duly qualified to mingle again in the world upon its own terms. Then he turned to Hawkesley.

"Poor Robert! He deserved better than to die by such a hand. Has Adair been arrested?"

"No."

"You do not mean that he has escaped?"

"For the present."

"The police have let him escape?"

"They have not yet secured him."

"So much for the boasted French police! We will see whether our English heads can help them. You will come with me to Versailles?"

And with an alacrity which he had not displayed since the day on which the one great blow had descended upon him, Lygon hastened to throw together a few private papers and other matters, and to secure them, and was then about to go out, when Hawkesley stopped him.

"What do you propose to do, Arthur?"

"What is there to do but one thing? Let us make the best of our way to Versailles, learn for ourselves what particulars we can, and if these police cannot hit upon the track of the miscreant, we may be more fortunate."

"You are for hunting him down?"

"Can you ask *that?* Do you think that I will rest until I have seen him brought out on the scaffold?"

"Sit down, and listen to me."

"Let us talk, if it must be so, as we go along. Come."

"No. I have an answer to give in Paris, and it must be given after you have heard me. Ten minutes will suffice, and they will not be thrown away."

"You speak in a tone that leaves me no choice," said Lygon, laying his watch on the table before him.

"It is proposed to me by the police that we should let this man escape altogether," said Hawkesley, quietly.

Lygon uttered a deep oath.

"He is their confederate, but we could hardly have expected this," he said, furiously. "But they shall not save him. Come, let us get upon his traces. I have had some experience in such matters. If we once run him down, all the confederates in the world shall not save him."

"It is not for his own sake that they wish to spare him."

"For whose then, in the name of — ?"

"For yours."

"Mine!"

"I have asked you for ten minutes, Arthur, and you will do well to hear me out."

"For *my* sake," repeated Lygon, angrily.

"It is my duty to tell you what has been said to me. Then you will act as you may think fit."

Arthur Lygon sat down opposite to Hawkesley, and fixed a steady gaze upon his brother-in-law.

"Finish, Charles. You are no trifler, but every moment we waste is a shame and a disgrace to Urquhart's brothers."

"There are duties to the living as well as to the dead, Arthur. Listen to me. Urquhart has died a sacrifice for a reputation that should be dearer to us than any memory."

"I do not understand you."

"It is all before me now, and you must not doubt for a moment that I am speaking the entire truth. The villain who has slain Urquhart had obtained possession of letters which Robert believed to be conclusive evidence against your wife, Arthur. She, poor wretch, terrified by his threats to use them, came to France to rescue them from him, in order to throw them before you, and beg you to judge and save her."

Lygon waved his hand impatiently, but made no reply.

"This is the truth, as God shall judge me, Lygon!"

"You desire to believe it, and you do," replied Lygon, quickly, "and that is all that you have a right to say. I do not believe it—"

"Nor desire to believe it?" asked Hawkesley, sternly.

"Do I desire to believe a lie? Did that dead man give credit to such a tale? We will not talk of this any more," said Arthur, becoming pale with emotion which he struggled to hide.

"We will talk of it, Lygon, while I have anything

to say to you—or we never speak again. I have not shown myself so worthless a friend, I think, as to be so cast off, or to be denied what you would grant to a stranger. The happiness of Laura, of yourself, and of your children, is as dear to me as my own, and I will not be silenced while I believe that I can do you service by speaking. You must answer me, too. If I can prove to you beyond a shadow of doubt that what I have told you is true, what will you do?"

"Let us hunt down this murderer, and then we may speak of other things."

"Other things, Arthur Lygon! Are those words for the happiness of your own life and Laura's? Will you answer me now? If I have truly told you what was Laura's errand to France, will you forbid her to accomplish it?"

"Laura and I meet no more in this world. When Urquhart's death has been avenged, I will leave the rest to your care."

"May God deal to you more justice than you deal to the mother of your children!"

"You do not understand *me*, Hawkesley," was Lygon's calm reply. "Be content to believe that. Have you more to say?"

"But that I hope to save you and Laura yet, you and I should say no more to one another from this minute. But I will not be defeated by your resolution, until I have done my work. Do you hear me say that, Arthur Lygon?"

"Do you believe," replied Lygon, kindly, "that

I ever doubted your affection for us? But you can serve no good purpose by endeavouring to make me share the deception that has been practised on you. By Heaven, Charles," he exclaimed, passionately, "if the past could be done away, and I could be once more what I was on that accursed day when I went to what I had left a happy home, and found the abandoned—" the words rose chokingly in his throat, and it was with tearful eyes, and yet a vehement utterance, that after a pause he finished the sentence. "If the past could be undone, as Heaven shall judge *me*, I could go a pauper and a cripple towards my grave, and go in gladness that I had known the love of a pure and true woman. A curse has come upon me, and I have not deserved it."

Hawkesley looked at him in silence, while Arthur dashed away the tears which he did not attempt to hide, and made an effort to recover his self-possession. Then the former said—

"I ask you, Arthur, for the sake of our relationship—for the sake of our friendship—for the sake of your children, one thing. You have no right to refuse it me?"

"What do you ask?"

"That you will see these letters."

"To what good? Why would you force upon me the evidences of my dishonour?"

"I ask you to read them."

"And if I should," replied Lygon, bitterly, "and if they should prove, as I suppose by your urging it

you think they will prove, somewhat less conclusive than such cursed letters usually are; if it should chance to turn out that they leave only doubts where we believe there is certainty—what then?"

"Then I will say, Arthur Lygon, carry out your resolve, and let the name of Laura be forgotten by you. That is my reply."

"What do you expect?" asked Lygon, in a low, despairing voice.

"I will not say. But I will ask you once more, if these letters utterly refute themselves, or, rather, prove that poor Urquhart read them wrong, and interpreted them into a terrible falsehood; if, in your own judgment, and I will ask no other, they testify to the truth and innocence of Laura, will you accept that testimony?"

"Hawkesley, you have not thought over all this as I have done. Heaven forbid you should ever have need to give such thoughts to anything in this world! But even you, with all your affectionate resolution to see comfort where there is nothing but blackness and sorrow, even you must perceive that the very story you have adopted is Laura's self-condemnation. There is a book of letters, such as must establish a woman's innocence—my God, that I should be alive and speaking such words about *my wife!*—and the fact that a scoundrel has these letters drags the woman from her home and separates her from her children for ever. What strong delusion has laid hold on you?"

"I will not argue it with you. I will only ask

you to believe it possible, and to say what you will do, should I be right."

"What else can I say than what I have said already? All is over between me and Laura. Let the inconceivable truth be that the letters are forgeries—do you assert that?"

"What then?"

"What—can you seriously hold such a thought? Does a woman fly her home in dread of a false charge? Would Laura have done so—Laura, whose courage at least was her virtue? Would she not have defied an accuser, and sent him to me to be dealt with as he deserved? Is it worth while to waste more time, Charles? Let us go to Versailles —or must I go alone?"

"Once more, will you see the letters? I do not ask you more."

"So be it, if you will. You have them?"

"No—the poor girl herself, who risked all to obtain them, and who has borne them away so gallantly, has them in her own keeping, and will hardly part with them again except that they may pass into your hands. But when they are laid before you, I have your promise to read them?"

"You have."

"One word more, and you shall go. I told you that the police officials, in proposing that this man should elude justice for the time, made the suggestion in your own interest. They naturally urged that vengeance on the murderer involved an exposure of the whole painful story which belongs to the

crime, and that a woman's honour is mixed up with that story. If Adair escapes, the tale is secret. If he is tried, it is public, and you have children."

"Ah!" said Lygon, with a deep sigh. "You fling your whole case to the winds. What has an innocent woman to fear from the truth?"

"The world, which never accepts the truth?"

"To save pain, then, to a guilty wife, I am asked to pardon the murderer of one of the two dearest friends I had in the world."

"Had it been my destiny to meet the fate of poor Robert, and I could have spoken a last request, it would have been that you abstained from revenge, under such circumstances. Do you think that I would not gladly stand by you and see the man guillotined? But the faces of your little children come between me and that scaffold."

"Let us do right," said Arthur Lygon, "and leave the rest to Providence. I am suffering under an undeserved punishment, and I will not deserve any part of it by foregoing my duty. That man has died by a crime brought about by the sin of my wife. So far as I can aid justice I will do so."

"And little Fred and Walter, are they to be pointed at through life, Arthur, as the children of one who, as you believed, sinned?"

"I will hope that each will have strength to vindicate his own character, and then he need not care what is said of another's."

"And Clara?"

"Do not speak of Clara."

"I must. I have a right to speak for her, loving her so well. Arthur, you know what the world is to woman. Do not think of Clara as she now is, a child at play. Add a few years, and think of her as a beautiful and loving girl, whose destiny it would be to make some good fellow happy—only his friends look at her, and admire her, and pass on, and next day come and tell him that her mother was compromised in a sad French story, and that a daughter is, most frequently, what her mother was—could you bear to know that such things were said, Lygon?"

"You work hard upon my feelings, Charles, and now listen in return. I have all through life sought to act upon principle, and it is not when I come to the hardest trial of life that I ought to give way. And I will not. I would give *my* life for those children, but I will not forget my duty, because hereafter my having done it may cause them pain and suffering. I will do my duty."

"You will do all in your power to arrest Adair?"

"I will, and I have waited too long. I must now go."

"I will not attempt to delay you any longer."

"And unless I am seconded by the police, I will go to a member of the government, and formally accuse them of screening the assassin. There may be reasons why they will not willingly lie under such a charge, and you can prove the proposition that has been made."

"I can. I will follow you to Versailles, Arthur. I have letters to write."

Lygon was at the door when he turned, and saw an expression of deep grief upon the face of his friend.

Arthur returned, took his hand, and clasped it warmly.

"You do not understand me, Charles," he said, "but do not doubt that I understand you, and all your affection."

Hawkesley made no answer, but when Lygon released his hand, withdrew it, and rose to go to his own room.

He walked towards it slowly, and Lygon hastened away.

But as soon as Arthur had left the hotel, Hawkesley put on his hat.

"Then I, too, have a duty," he said, in a low voice.

And he returned as speedily as he could to the bureau he had so lately quitted.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"You have decided, I perceive, Mr. Hawkesley," said M. ——, receiving him with gravity, and at once resuming the conversation, as if it had been interrupted for a moment only.

"How do you know, M. ——?"

"Your manner tells me that you have done so. I may almost go further, and believe that the suggestions which I made on the side of forbearance have had their weight with Mr. Lygon and yourself."

"With myself only."

"Ah! I regret that. I am sure that you did every justice to the arguments."

"You would imply that I did not. But, had my brother-in-law been here, you would have found that the strongest reason which we could urge was idle against his conviction of what his duty demands."

"And that is—"

"That, as the nearest relatives of Mr. Urquhart, we claim all the assistance the police can afford us in tracing the assassin."

"Such, then, is your demand of me? I have told you that I will be guided by your wishes, but I had hoped a different decision."

"Such would be Mr. Lygon's demand, but he has hurried off to Versailles in the hope of being himself able to afford aid in the detection of Adair."

M. ——, notwithstanding the gravity of the occasion, could scarcely repress a smile, but it was momentary.

"I cannot, I fear, flatter you with the idea that he will effect anything which the officers themselves fail in achieving. If Ernest Adair is wanted," he continued, resuming all his habitual composure, "he will be in their hands in a quarter of an hour from my signalling that he is to be taken."

"He has been discovered, then?" said Hawkesley.

And the feeling that came over him was a mixture of gratification and repugnance—the prey was marked down, and it required an effort to let it escape. There was something of natural indignation at the crime, something of the hunter's fierce instinct, and reluctance to spare. There is more of this in many a sacrifice to justice than we may all care to allow.

"In truth, he can hardly be said to have been well lost sight of. The officers are intelligent, and they were assisted with great zeal by several persons whose enmity Adair had successfully cultivated. Specially foremost in the chase was the mechanic * * * *, at whose house Urquhart was in the habit of trying certain experiments, and who, with his wife, seems to have been idolatrously devoted to your friend. It is rare for our inferior classes to show such attachment to a foreigner, but Mr. Urquhart's

character was of the kind that inspires the respect of the uneducated."

"He is in our hands, then?" repeated Hawkesley.

"When you will. I do not press you for any immediate answer—you have not taken half the time which I ventured to offer, nor, I suppose, have you seen the person whom I desired to visit you?"

"No. But it seemed to me that time was important. M. ——, I wish that Adair may be allowed to escape."

"No doubt. I could not suppose that you would come to any other decision. But you have surrendered your views in deference to those of your friend?"

"I have not. He has taken his own course, independently of me, and I claim the same liberty. In the interest of all who are concerned, I believe that I am acting best in requesting you to set the miscreant at liberty."

"We must not put it quite in that way," said M. ——, with the faintest curl of the lip. "He is not, in fact, in custody. But we understand one another."

Hawkesley then repeated a portion of the conversation he had had with Lygon, reserving, however, the threat of the latter to appeal to the Minister.

"I may save you some consideration," said M. ——, "by remarking that Mr. Lygon's idea that circumstances have given him any special right to interfere, is not worth discussion. Assuredly, it would have no weight with me. And I may be

forgiven if I say that I seem to recognise a sort of vindictiveness towards his wife in his extreme readiness to connect her with the crime that has been committed. The accident which brought the two men together arose but partially from anything bearing on Mrs. Lygon's history—Mr. Urquhart was bent upon meeting the other, and would have succeeded, unless prevented, whether those documents had been in existence or not."

"I did not combat his view—I felt it overstrained," said Hawkesley, "but that matters little. You will, then, ensure Adair's escape?"

"I almost think that you believe him in increased danger from the efforts of your brother-in-law."

"Mr. Lygon is a shrewd and resolute man, and I cannot say that he may not obtain such clues as may make it difficult for your officers to hold back."

"There will be no holding back. But now, Mr. Hawkesley, do you desire to impose any terms upon the man whom you are releasing? They are easily made under such circumstances."

"But not easily enforced."

"I will undertake that whatever engagement Adair enters into with you, he shall fulfil to the letter. Were your friend Mr. Aventayle here, he would tell you that there are terrors for those who are mad enough to forget pledges given to us."

"If it were possible to induce him to promise one thing—"

"I promise it in his behalf."

"It may be more important than you imagine.

If he would go to England, and there keep himself in readiness to afford some information—"

"Any you can ask of him."

"I? Do you think that I could ever find myself again face to face with the assassin, without striking him down? No, he must submit to be questioned by those who will not know to what a miscreant they are talking."

"He shall submit. I have some guess at the nature of the evidence you would extract from him, but we will speak of that presently. I am glad that you have come to this decision. I need not add to an English gentleman, that he will not unduly speak of what has passed. I make no absurd request of a pledge to secrecy, but I dare say that you will take care not to mention anything to zealous persons who may have notions like those of Mr. Lygon."

"I shall be too glad to be silent—to say nothing of my personal debt to you."

"Say nothing of that. We will now send for Wolowski."

CHAPTER XXVII.

"You were not, I am sure, fool enough to think of taking that window," said M. Wolowski to Ernest Adair.

The Pole entered, somewhat hastily, a garret with sloping roof, and with one square window that would just have permitted a slight man to pass through it. The room was at the top of a lonely old house about three miles from Versailles.

Adair turned upon the Pole, but there was no menace in the look of the slayer of Urquhart. He was haggard and nervous, and the effect of the terrible conflict he had gone through, and of its fearful issue, was visible in his easily agitated frame. His eyes were bloodshot, and his tongue incessantly played upon and moistened the feverish lips.

"You have traced me," said Adair. "It was a friend's business. I regret that I can offer you no hospitality."

"A couch and a chair," replied the Pole, looking round the miserable room, "and a scrap of looking-glass, and a picture of St. Somebody—female, however. Better men have been worse off. But, my brave Ernest, I never expected to see you again."

"Nor would you, Wolowski, had I not been robbed, and consequently been without the means—"

"Of bribery. Fie! is it thus you speak of old colleagues?"

"Of purchasing food," said Ernest Adair. "I am faint with hunger, or you should have had a longer chase, my friend."

"Actually hungry?" said Wolowski.

"Yes. I have scarcely tasted food for twenty-four hours. I did not mind it at first, but now the privation tells upon me. I am your prisoner."

"Nay, do not surrender until it is required of you. The weakest fortress expects the courtesy of a summons. But first let us throw provisions into the fortress."

And he handed a packet to Adair, which the latter tore open, and seizing some bread and meat ate them with an eagerness that excited the compassion of the Pole, cruel only as matter of business.

"It was well I thought of providing myself against a night in the open air," said the Pole. "Do not eat too hastily, however. And here, take my flask. I suppose you will not stab me while I am drawing the cork."

He handed a travelling-bottle to Adair, who, however, took but a small quantity, and returned it.

"You should have nothing to say against that liquor. It is from the cellar of the Silver Lion."

"I am restored, in some measure," said Adair, "and I am ready to accompany you, M. Wolowski."

"Thanks for the Monsieur, which you omitted before. It is a sort of grace after meat. But I have not come to arrest you. We leave duties of

that kind, as you know, to inferior agents, which prevents unpleasantness afterwards, when people are released and meet as friends in society."

"You have not come to arrest me? Ah, but there are men round the house?"

"I will show my confidence in an armed man by telling him that there is not one. Now, do you meditate an attack upon me?"

"Why are you here?"

"That is a practical question, to which I will give you an answer later. That blow was struck well, Ernest, that blow in the drawing-room."

"It was struck in defence of my own life."

"The master of the house arrests a robber, and the robber holds that he may kill the honest man."

"I was no robber. I came there to seek my own property, and I was watched and trapped. He entered the house intending to murder me, and he had all but succeeded when I saved myself with a blow."

"I am bound to tell you that the most unfavourable view will be taken of your case."

"That means that M. —— sacrifices me."

"Well, it is thought that to give up a first-rate employé of the police to justice would have a good effect upon the public mind, and therefore circumstances will be recalled, and on the whole your case is not an agreeable one."

"You know all," said Adair, "and will tell me what you please. I thought it possible that the Englishmen might wish to avoid a prosecution."

"The Englishmen have strange notions of duty, and have invoked all the vengeance of the law upon you."

"Regardless of the consequences."

"Regardless of the fact, strongly urged upon them by M. ——, that you will, when upon trial, make it a pleasure as well as a business to offer Paris and London a story neither is likely to forget."

"They might have spared me, nevertheless," said Adair, under his breath.

"What is that *arrière pensée*, if one might ask?"

"No matter. But you do not tell me that I am a prisoner."

"My friend, your persistence in being a prisoner becomes monotonous. I repeat to you that you are as free as I am, so far as I know, and I add, that I have only a favour or so to ask, which you can refuse or not as you think proper."

"I am in exactly the position to make terms?"

"And am I in the habit of offering such things idly? But I make allowance for your excitement. I remember that the first time I had unfortunately an opportunity of experiencing similar sensations, I was a good deal haunted by the incessant presence of a red tint which insisted on settling upon everything. I was younger than you are, however," added the Pole, "and imaginative, besides being slightly patriotic. You look really very much shaken —I have often dissuaded you from Cognac, but try it now."

"No. I am strong enough."

"And wisely keep the brain unclouded, the better to judge of my offer. You are right. Now, attend. You had a great desire to visit England?"

"England! True," said Ernest, after a pause. "It seems an age since I was thinking of that."

"The age has passed, and brought the event nearer."

"You would send me to England!"

"You will go of your own will and accord, if you go at all."

"I am traced here, M. Wolowski, and I understand all the rest."

"Then use your comprehension, and do not raise subjects which it is useless to discuss. Suppose yourself in London."

"I tell you that I was robbed at a place where I lay down to sleep, and I am without a franc in the world."

"Excitement has enfeebled your usually lively imagination. The streets of London are paved with gold, as English clowns believe. At least you can imagine yourself there, and beyond the reach of want. I am not very wise, perhaps, in exposing my pocket-book to you, but there it is," and he laid it on the table near him.

"Ah! I am wanted for some desperate service. Is there another Silvestre in London?" said Adair, slightly shuddering.

"Not at present," replied the Pole, coolly. "My

friend, it would seem that you are somewhat tigerish, and having once tasted—"

"Let us speak of your plans," said Adair, with much irritation.

"Decidedly tigerish," said Wolowski, looking at him quietly. "Change of air becomes a necessity for you. Well, do you accept the idea of an English sojourn?"

"What am I to do in England?"

"I have no more idea than yourself. Certainly, I do not think that it would be advisable for you at present to urge Mr. Aventayle, the manager, to the fulfilment of the engagement he seems to have promised. Your countrymen are said to be ferocious, and they like to see ballet-girls torn to pieces by lions on the stage, and to behold other frightful exhibitions, but there is a limit to their gladiatorial propensities. I do not think that in your *rôle* of an escaped assassin you would be acceptable to the insular mind."

Adair listened in silence.

"You agree with me? Well, but I can imagine that if it suited your arrangements to go to London, to find yourself a modest apartment in some quarter entirely removed from that in which wanderers from France and other happy lands chiefly congregate—for then, if there be another Silvestre, as you imagine, you will not encounter so unworthy an acquaintance—in this case English hospitality may not be disturbed by any interference of your colleagues."

"I am still one of you, then?"

"Why not? No offence has been proved against you, and as you are English, we will give you the benefit of the charming Anglican doctrine, which, if it were really practised in England, or elsewhere, would make society impossible. Consider yourself what you please. You will not be troubled with many orders from head-quarters."

"You said that the Englishmen had invoked the law."

"Some invocations are not immediately answered, as you may possibly be aware. At all events, the law can answer at any time. Complete the picture I have suggested, and suppose yourself in some remote district in London, and passing, for the sake of decorum, under some other name than that which you have laboured, not in vain, to make famous. The name of your friend Silvain may serve as well as another."

"No, I will not take that," said Adair, quickly.

"It sounds pleasantly."

"It sounds like—no matter, I will not take that. Anything else will do as well. I will call myself by an English name—call me Hyde."

"I applaud the courage that can make a jest of one's condition at such a time."

"Jest—bah! It was the name of my mother. It is easily remembered."

"I will think of the park, of which you will be an ornament—that will do. Then, Mr. Hyde will have the kindness to take this card, and as soon as he has

an address, he will forward it, with all care that it reaches its destination—to the gentleman here named. And Mr. Hyde will take care that when any message is sent to him, in reply, he is at home to receive it, and that he complies, in letter and in spirit, with any demand that may be addressed to him."

"Any demand?"

"Any," replied the Pole, changing his manner. "Do you comprehend?"

"Yes."

"There is money—there is the card—there is a passport"—replied Wolowski, abruptly, placing each in succession on the couch. "And one word more. Place your hands behind you," he said in a tone of command. "Clasp them together, and turn your back to me."

Adair obeyed, and the Pole held his hands together firmly, and said something in a fierce and hissing whisper.

"No need of menace," replied Ernest, angrily.

"Leave the room, assassin," said the Pole, releasing his hands, and pointing to the papers on the couch.

Adair gathered them up with deliberation, placed them in his pockets, and left the garret without even a glance at the other.

Laura's hand was all but on the door of her sister's house in London. She held under her arm the treasured volume, and she was about to knock, when she once more heard her name.

Ernest Adair stood before her.

"The dead man." Whether the words escaped her or not, this was the thought in that brief interval between the moment and unconsciousness.

"Go to Lipthwaite, Mrs. Lygon, and go instantly," said Adair.

Laura remembered no more, until she found herself in the arms of Beatrice.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"THE children?"

Those were the first words uttered by Mrs. Lygon when restored to consciousness.

"They are well, dearest," answered Beatrice, "but they are not here. I was glad to give them and my own little ones a relief from the quietness of a sick house, and all are gone on a visit to Hampstead. But I will send for them."

"Stay—no—it is better so," said Laura. "They are well, and happy—you are keeping nothing from me? They are not sent there because they are ill, or have been ill, and I away?"

"Would I not tell you? It is a holiday for them, and most glad I was to give it them. But we can so easily fetch them."

"No, dear. I have borne the separation so long that for a few hours more I will continue to bear it. There is much to do. Beatrice!" she exclaimed, the colour that had partially returned to her face again disappearing, as she held her sister tightly by the hand, "is it *there?*"

"Is what there, dear?" said Beatrice, holding her hand affectionately.

"Did you not—did you see what was speaking to me?"

"My darling Laura, why do you shudder in that manner?"

"You must have seen it."

"Tell me—what *is* it that is so agitating you?"

Laura threw her arms round her sister's neck, and sobbed violently. It was not for some minutes that she ceased to tremble, and looked up piteously at Beatrice.

"You have had enough, Heaven knows, to make you wretched, my own darling," said her sister, "but all is over now. Do not tremble so."

"What did you see, Beatrice?" she whispered.

"My love, a most distressing sight, but nothing to cause this terror. There was a violent knock, and I flew to the door—a foreign gentleman said in French that you were fainting, and I caught you in my arms. I know no more.'

"You did see him, then, Beatrice?"

"Him—yes—hardly. I had no time to notice him, my dearest. If I thought at all, it was that he had seen you fainting, and had come to your assistance. I did not even thank him, I was too much taken up with you. Laura, what does your look mean?"

"Thank him! Did you know him?"

"No. Laura, while you speak the truth flashes on me. It was that man. It was Adair! You have returned with him?"

"No, no, no!" cried Laura, clinging yet more closely to Beatrice. "You have not heard—they did not tell you?"

"I see—I see it all—I understand your terror —it is you whom they have not told. Charles's letter said that, and it was all driven from my mind at seeing you. Laura, you do not suppose—you have no such foolish thoughts—no. That was Ernest Adair at the door?"

"Then you have *not* heard," said Laura in pitiable agitation.

"Yes, I have heard all. I was to have broken it to you gently, but in your state of mind—there, my dearest, do not look so ghastly—it is sad, but we must strengthen ourselves for all our strange fate. Laura, you have been told that Ernest Adair was dead."

"What?—what?—Beatrice, for Heaven's love speak very quickly!"

"He escaped—it is poor Robert Urquhart who died."

With a wild cry—yet it was no cry of despair—Laura buried her face in the cushion of the couch, and wept aloud.

"That is best," murmured Beatrice. "Anything but another minute of that terror."

And she allowed Laura's tears to flow. And then gradually and with all sedulous fondness, Beatrice addressed herself to soothe her, and after a time Laura recovered her self-possession, and laid her head on her sister's bosom. They did not speak, but each knew the thoughts of the other.

Two hours later the sisters were on their way to Lipthwaite.

"You were right, dear," said Mrs. Hawkesley, after they had travelled some miles fortunately alone. "It was better not to see her. What *could* you have said to her?"

"Much, very much, Beatrice, but this is not the time to say it. And perhaps she could not have borne to hear it."

"She bears bad news well," said Beatrice, with some bitterness. "It is for your own sake, not hers, that I am glad we came away without your seeing her. When you come back, you will consult your own feelings."

"Ah, I see that you have understood Bertha."

"Yes, and as I never thought to do. I wish that she were well enough to leave us. But we will speak of that to-morrow."

When they reached Lipthwaite, Mr. Berry was on the platform. He hastily scanned the faces that passed him, and instantly recognising Mrs. Hawkesley, was at the carriage door as it was opened. He raised his hat to the sisters, and merely said,

"The carriage is waiting."

"The carriage!" repeated Mrs. Hawkesley.

"Certainly. I had your telegraph."

"I sent none. Laura could have sent none."

"*He* sent it," whispered Mrs. Lygon.

Mr. Berry looked at them in some surprise, but seemed to consider the matter not worth conversation, and led them to the carriage.

"She will see *you*," he said to Mrs. Lygon.

No other words passed until they reached Mr. Berry's house, and the sisters found themselves in the room where Arthur Lygon had had those strange passages of war with her who now lay in the last chamber she was to enter alive.

"There is little time to waste," said Mr. Berry. "I will let her know that you have arrived."

But before he could leave the room, Hester entered with a message, desiring Mrs. Lygon to come up-stairs.

"Yes, yes, with me," said Laura, hurriedly, almost imploringly, to her sister.

Mrs. Hawkesley rose to follow.

"It is not for me to interfere," said Mr. Berry, "my part is done. But I do not think, Mrs. Hawkesley, that you will be permitted to remain in the room."

"We will see," replied Beatrice, quietly.

They were conducted to Mrs. Berry's room. It was large and cheerful, and there was little to indicate the chamber of sickness. The curtains of the window were drawn back as far as possible, the blinds were raised, and the sashes thrown open, so as to afford the inmate the largest view of the beautiful hill scene before the house. Flowers were upon the tables, and the sunshine streaming in, did much to banish the thoughts with which a stranger naturally crossed the threshold.

"Lay in that chamber," has been written.

But it was not so when the sisters entered.

Mrs. Berry, if she had been upon the bed, had quitted it, and enveloped in wrappers, sat in an easy chair, but upright, and as one whose last thought would have been to seek sympathy, or to succumb to reproach. Her hard features had scarcely wasted with illness, and the cold eye, if not as keen as of old, was as unshrinking. Something of a mechanical smile came upon her thin lips as she watched the entrance of Laura and Beatrice, and a slight inclination of the head to the latter intimated that the dying woman was mindful of the proprieties of life, and of the courtesy due to a stranger. Of Laura she took no notice, except that Mrs. Berry pointed to a chair, an attention which she withheld from Beatrice.

"Mr. Berry is below, I believe," she said, in a distinct voice.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Hawkesley.

"Will you, madam, do me the favour to sit with him for a short time? We shall not detain you long."

"My sister has been and is very ill," said Beatrice, gently, "and she requires assistance."

"I have been and am very ill," returned Mrs. Berry, "and I require compliance. That is, if this visit is not one of mere attention to a sick woman. In that case I am obliged, and will detain neither."

Her tone was one which conveyed an unmistakeable decision, and the sisters felt it.

"It must be as Mrs. Berry wishes, of course,

said Mrs. Hawkesley; "but you will ring for me, dear Laura, if you are in need of me."

"I charge myself with the care of a lady who needs so much protection," said Mrs. Berry, unpleasantly.

Mrs. Hawkesley withdrew.

"See that the door is closed, and put down the night-bolt," said Mrs. Berry. "And do not look scared. The string is here, close to me, so that I can easily draw it, if your nerves should give way and we should have to call in assistance. I thought that ladies who run over Europe alone were superior to that kind of weakness, and were only weak in their moral sense. Well, why are you here?" she asked, after Laura had complied with her directions.

"You know better than myself, Mrs. Berry."

"It may be so. I will tell you, at all events, what it is that you think you have come to see and hear. You are prepared to hear a woman whose days or hours are supposed to be numbered, make what is called a death-bed atonement for certain wrongs which she has done, and supplicate forgiveness from a fellow-mortal, before she goes to the great account."

"No such thought has brought me here. I know of no wrongs which you have done me, Mrs. Berry."

"That sounds like truth, yet it must be false. Who sent you here?"

"I was advised to come by one who has wronged me wickedly."

"You are speaking of Mr. Ernest Hardwick?"

The old name sounded so strangely to the ear of Mrs. Lygon that she hesitated one moment in reply.

"Mr. Adair, if you prefer the false name under which he has made himself so acceptable to married ladies."

"It was his advice."

"It was good advice, better than he has been in the habit of giving you and your family. What do you expect from following it?"

"I do not know."

"Ah," said Mrs. Berry, with a touch of the old venom. "I am right, then. You are to sit there, silent and dignified, to hear the old woman's confessions, and then to forgive me or not, as your own judgment may dictate."

"I repeat to you, Mrs. Berry, that I do not know that there is anything which I have to forgive you."

"I think that you are speaking the truth, but sit there—no, there, more in the light. Yes, you are very obedient, in spite of that proud look. You show me that you expect much, or you would not put up with my speaking to you in this way."

"If you knew what I have endured," said Mrs. Lygon, quietly, "you would not be inclined to treat me unkindly."

"What she has endured!" repeated the older woman. "True, we must spare her feelings—no one but herself has ever had to endure. Well, we must make it as easy for you as we can, Mrs. Lygon, but

as you are playing a deep game, you must not be nice. You ran away from your husband, I am told, and now you want him to take you back again. Ah, you don't even rise indignantly at such words—you are in earnest, indeed, and I need not have cautioned you."

"I am in earnest," said Laura, calmly.

"And you can afford to despise another woman's hard words, if you gain your point?"

"Can you, and will you aid me in my object, Mrs. Berry?" replied Laura, still calmly.

"We shall see," said Mrs. Berry, her cold blue eye resting unpityingly on the speaker. "Is that the volume of your love-letters?"

Laura crimsoned with indignation, and answered,

"This is the collection of infamous writing which the man you have named dared to lay before my brother and sister as mine."

"Be pleased to lay it before me. Nay, do not be afraid for it. If we had wished to destroy it, are you fool enough to imagine that you could have saved it for a day? Place it there, near me."

Mrs. Berry reached out her thin arm, bared by the movement, and clutched at the book, looking Laura hard in the face as she did so. Then she began to turn slowly over the leaves, here and there pausing to read a passage, and then passing on, with a strange smile. She seemed purposely to protract this examination, and when she had reached the end, she turned back, and read anew from several pages. At last she said,

"We were very much in earnest, young lady, when we wrote these letters."

Laura's look of anger was her only reply.

"But the warmth and ardour of a first love, and the want of knowledge how much we increase our power by disguising our sentiments, are plausible excuses for young persons, even when they do forget themselves, and write down things which they ought not even to think. We must make all allowance."

The studied malice of the speech defeated itself, and Laura remained in contemptuous silence.

"Penitence in our heart, if not on our lips," said Mrs. Berry, after waiting some moments to see whether she had exasperated Laura enough for a reply. "And that is the true penitence, my love. Only as you come to claim a confession from me, I think you must not be so very obstinate. Well, are you very sorry for having written these letters?"

"How dare you, as you say on your death-bed, how dare you speak such words to me?" said Laura, trembling with anger.

"That, my love," said Mrs. Berry, who seemed exulting at the agitation she had caused, "that is a question for myself. You must show a more fitting frame of mind, or I shall not be able to convince myself that you are the kind of person whom I ought to assist. Come, stoop the proud heart, and say that you are very sorry you were ever led into such evil ways, and that you are heartily ashamed of the sins of youth."

"I am justly punished—"

"Yes, love, that is a very good beginning. You are justly punished—"

"Let me speak, Mrs. Berry. Punished, by this cruel insolence, for having listened to the advice of a villain. I ought not to have come here."

"Why do you apply that name to my husband? He has always behaved well to your family, and has not deserved such language."

"You know well that I did not allude to him."

"But I know well that it is his counsel, and not that of the unfortunate gentleman we have mentioned, that brought you here. I know that Mr. Berry went to London, and saw your sister, that lady whom I have just turned out of my room, and I have some guess at what he said to that lady, which makes it strange that she should have thought of honouring me with a visit. Mr. Berry has a remarkable attachment for your husband, Mrs. Lygon, and will not shrink at any sacrifice to show it. He has not even hesitated to bring strangers into his wife's room, on the most agitating business, when he has been made aware that her life may be an affair of hours. He is a truly kind friend, Mrs. Lygon, and one who deserves all gratitude from those he serves."

"I understand but half of what you say."

"Dare you deny that Mr. Berry has visited your sister, for the purpose of helping you to deceive your husband?"

Laura's eye fell on the book, and in that look Mrs. Berry, watchful, read an instinct to secure it

and depart. The old woman laid firm clutch upon the volume.

"The book is mine, until I choose to part with it, Mrs. Lygon," she said, in an under voice of taunt. "I am ill, certainly, but I do not think that you can take it from me."

"What is the object of your insults, Mrs. Berry? I have never done you harm."

"Have you not?" replied Mrs. Berry, slowly. "Ah! but you shall never have the triumph of knowing how you have injured me, or of thinking that after all a bitter account has been but balanced."

She looked very evilly at Laura, and kept her clutch upon the book.

"I am as ignorant of having injured you, as I was that you have injured me," said Mrs. Lygon.

"You would leave me now," said Mrs. Berry, "only I have this hostage for your remaining. Well, perhaps I may pay you for your patience, but I will do it in my own way. You will not say that you are sorry for having written these sad letters—they are clever, too, in their way, but sad when we think of them as from the pen of an unmarried lady."

"If you couple that wickedness with my name again, I will ring for my sister and Mr. Berry—"

"Tear the book from the dying woman's hands, and leave the house in an excess of virtuous indignation! Do. But what will you gain by that—how much nearer will you draw to the heart of

Arthur Lygon? Do not be a fool, child. I hold your destiny in my hands. So, you repudiate these letters?"

"Dare you ask me?"

"Indeed I dare, with my hands upon your own writing. Is it not so, Mrs. Arthur Lygon?" said Mrs. Berry, plunging her hands into separate parts of the volume.

"You are aware of the wicked fraud. You know —you know, and you dare not deny that it is so— that you have there six letters, written in all innocence by a young girl, and containing nothing— folly, perhaps, but no wrong; that these letters have been bound up with twenty others, so shameful that no woman's hand could ever have been in them."

"Indeed?" said Mrs. Berry, with a smile.

"You *know* this."

"You are strangely positive. But you may be speaking the truth. Still, if you are, there are at least six letters here which speak of love."

"Yes, it is true, a girl's first love, when she hardly knows the meaning of the word, and when she writes from her fancy, and not her heart—there are those letters."

"And they are yours?"

"They are mine."

"So, we come to something like confession at last. I do not think that these admitted letters are addressed to Mr. Arthur Lygon—that is not the name with which so many endearing epithets are coupled."

"You know to whom they were written, and that he has long been dead."

"And our heart sleeps in his tomb?"

"The girl's fancy had been forgotten, almost the whole childlike folly, long before he died, years before I met my husband."

"So completely forgotten, that the frank and open-hearted Laura never told her husband that he was not so fortunate as to be the first possessor of her heart. Do I not know your history well?"

"You have the truth, I know not how you learned it."

"Why was this confidence withheld from Arthur Lygon? Had it been given, these letters could never have been an engine for separating you, and his generous nature would have appreciated your frankness."

"It was not given, unhappily," said Mrs. Lygon, "and it is useless to dwell upon that error."

"Why was it not given, I ask again?"

"And I cannot answer."

"Then I will answer for you. It was because the pure and candid Laura Vernon had in the meantime, and after her first love had died out, found consolation in a second."

"What?"

"In a second love, which might have been more prosperous, only its object had been already appropriated. Laura Vernon's next passion was for the lover of her sister Bertha."

"It is false!" said Mrs. Lygon.

"It must be true," said Mrs. Berry, calmly. "And her influence over him was very great—I will not say how great. Indeed, it was hard for some people to decide whether it was Laura or Bertha who had the firmest hold upon Mr. Hardwick's heart."

Laura sprang up as if she had been assailed by some venomous animal.

"A wicked, a cruel slander! And it could have come but from one person; there cannot be two persons living who are base enough to have forged such a lie. It comes from him whom I have hated from the first hour that we met, whom I have never ceased to hate, and who has haunted my life like a fiend. I thought that vengeance had come upon him at last, but he has escaped it, and again I am met by his villany, even down here, in the very chamber—"

"Do not hesitate. I am not afraid of the word —in the very chamber of death."

"When *is* my punishment to end?" exclaimed Laura.

"You have always hated Ernest Hardwick," said Mrs. Berry, in a quiet voice. "It is an easy thing to say—now. But he was not a man to hate."

Laura's look was more eloquent than any spoken reply.

"He was a man to loathe and despise," she said "A sordid wretch who would wring money from the terrors of two poor girls, who feared that his dangerous malice would ruin them with society, and who deprived themselves almost of necessaries

to scrape together what he demanded—you are right, that is not a man to hate."

A curious look, not of dissatisfaction, came over Mrs. Berry's face while Laura spoke her indignant words. But she answered:

"Those two girls must have been in his power, or where was the force of his threats?"

"*One* was—and the second was her sister, and loved her, Mrs. Berry."

"And it is the second who is talking to me?"

And the angry crimson, again spreading over Laura's brow, was the answer to the doubt.

"Ah! we all have much to learn. I have learned something, and I must not die in debt."

She turned over and over some of the leaves of the letters, but rather listlessly, as if her thoughts were not upon the lines she seemed to be reading. At last she turned suddenly to Laura.

"Answer me a question."

Yes."

"We are two women—alone—and whatever your answer may be, I give you the word of one who is dying that it shall never be known beyond this room, but answer me truthfully."

"If I answer at all, I will."

"Ernest Hardwick, was he ever your lover?"

"Never!" replied Laura, with indignant emphasis.

"But he sought to be?"

"He once dared to say words which he never dared to repeat."

"If he said that you gave him midnight meetings?"

"He spoke falsely."

"I think I know truth when I hear it, and I believe that I hear it now."

"You do indeed, Mrs. Berry."

"I believe it, I tell you. And, as I said, I will not die in debt. I told you that you would not hear confession and penitence from me until you had led the way. But it appears to me that you have nothing to confess and repent. I have been mistaken in you. I am not half so much interested in you, Mrs. Lygon, as I was yesterday. You seem to me to be a good sort of woman, whose kind nature made you a victim when you were a girl, and has done it again now that you are wife and mother; and as for the courage for which I was told you were celebrated, it seems to be sheer cowardice, that drives you to do things which a really brave person would avoid. Well, you cannot help your nature, but I wish I had known something more about you a few weeks ago. Will you please to go down-stairs?"

"But you—"

"Please to go down-stairs, and request Mr. Berry to come up. There, do not fear for your book. I have far more interest in it than you have. Had I been in your place, I would never have moved from my husband's home. I would have torn out the letters which I owned as mine, and thrown them at

my husband's feet, and defied the devil and all his works. Why did you not?"

Laura did not speak.

"No answer. Well, fetch Mr. Berry. Yes, and request your sister to come up also. I think that both of them may like to hear, in company, something which I shall tell them. Go."

Laura obeyed the imperative word and gesture, and went down. She found Mrs. Hawkesley alone, but in answer to Laura's inquiring look Beatrice pointed to the garden, where its owner was pacing moodily among his trees.

"He only mentioned that we had nothing to say to one another, and left me. What has his wife said?"

"Nothing. But she seems to intend to make some revelation, and desires that you will both be present. A strange, poisonous woman, Beatrice," said Laura, in an emphatic whisper.

"A bad woman," replied Beatrice, "and it is frightful to think that she is so near her end. But we had better go up."

Mr. Berry was summoned, and the message delivered.

"If it is your wish, Mrs. Lygon, I will be present. You have a right to decide what witnesses shall be there. I tell you at once that they may hear strange things."

"And who but my husband's oldest friend should hear what is said to me?"

"That is enough."

A bell had been heard to ring, and while they spoke Hester entered again, took from one of the tables a large Bible, and went out hastily. Mr. Berry observed her, and a dark look, almost a scowl, came upon his kindly face.

"Take chairs," said Mrs. Berry, when they came into the room.

Mr. Berry noticed that the Bible was placed on the ground, close to the chair of his wife. Laura's glance was at her own volume, which still lay at the hand of Mrs. Berry.

"Dear Edward," said Mrs. Berry, in a gentle voice, "it is well that these ladies have arrived before my rapidly sinking strength leaves me, and while I am in possession of such mental faculties as it has pleased God to give me. You will be able to testify hereafter, if need, that I am perfectly competent to the transaction of business, and that I am not the victim of any of the hallucinations which are said to cloud the brain of those who are departing."

The speech was in Mrs. Berry's favourite style, and was delivered with as much precision as if it had been studied.

"You do not answer, dear Edward. It will be satisfactory to these ladies that you should do so."

"Your mind is as clear as ever, Marion," replied her husband, shortly.

"You will be ready to certify, hereafter, that such was the case," said Mrs. Berry.

"Yes."

"Then, Mrs. Arthur Lygon, and you, Mrs. Hawkesley, have the goodness to listen to me. In a few days, and perhaps in a few hours, I shall be past knowing or caring what is said or thought of Marion Berry. My own hopes for the future are based upon too secure a rock to leave me in the weak belief that any act of mine will conduce to my eternal welfare. I have made up that account, and the world has nothing to do with it. What I may choose to do now is done of my own free will, and you must not couple it with the thought that I am making an atonement for aught that I may have been led to do in other days. Of my own will and choice I tell you, I am about to make a statement which you will all remember to the day when you, like me, shall be waiting to die."

She spoke in a low distinct voice, every syllable audible to them all. Mr. Berry's thoughts were his own—Laura's were selfish—but Beatrice, somewhat less painfully interested, felt, if only for a moment, a sympathy with the hard and guilty woman, who in nature's last hours was thus wilfully isolating herself, and who sat there almost defiant of those who surrounded her.

"I hold under my hand," she said, "a book containing letters, the character of which you all know. I call upon Mrs. Arthur Lygon to point out which of those letters she admits to have written. Come here, Laura Lygon, and say which are Laura Vernon's letters."

Mrs. Lygon approached the table, and as Mrs.

Berry turned the leaves, Laura placed her finger on a note. It was a little note, written in a beautiful and small hand, crossed and crossed.

"That is the first," said Mrs. Berry. "Edward, take this pen, and mark the letter with your name, that you may hereafter identify it without hesitation."

Mr. Berry obeyed in silence.

She continued to turn the leaves, and the same process was observed until six letters had been marked. Then Laura, without a word, resumed her seat.

"Nothing more in this volume was written by you?"

"Nothing."

"Edward, place this Bible on the table."

She beckoned to Laura, seized her reluctant hand, and held it on the book.

"As God shall judge *you* in *your* dying hour, you have spoken the truth about these letters?"

"I have."

"Then comes my turn," said Mrs. Berry, laying her hand upon the Bible. "I call Him to witness the solemn declaration of a dying woman, that the remainder of these letters, twenty in number, *were composed by myself, Marion Berry, and by Ernest Hardwick, or Adair, together, and were written, as they appear here, by him only.* Take note of this declaration, and to you, Edward Berry, I deliver the volume for safe keeping."

Mrs. Lygon listened with speechless astonishment

to this statement. For a moment she glanced round at the faces of her companions, as if to be assured that they too had heard it. Upon the countenance of Mr. Berry there was nothing but stern composure, and he seemed as one whom no revelation could surprise or grieve. On the face of Mrs. Hawkesley had come the natural look of repugnance.

Mrs. Berry also surveyed the faces of her companions—and a defying smile rose upon the thin lips.

She seemed about to speak, when Mr. Berry said, rising,

"You have no more to say?"

"Nothing to you. Nothing to that lady, who is looking so kindly upon a dying woman."

"God forgive you—I cannot trust my tongue," said Beatrice, leaving the room hastily.

"It is well to be prayed for," said Mrs. Berry, darting an angry glance after her. "Edward, you are the master of the house, attend to your guest. Mrs. Lygon, I have another word or two for you."

Mr. Berry departed, preserving the silence he had sought to maintain throughout the interview.

"Now, you have something to ask me, or you are less than woman," said Mrs. Berry, abandoning the cold, malicious tone which she had used, and speaking almost as one who is ready to exchange a confidence for a pleasant question.

"What *can* I ask you," said Laura, "wicked, cruel woman. What had a helpless girl done to you that you should do her this wrong?"

"Nothing, it seems. But I believed that she had robbed me of the affections of the only man I ever loved in this world."

"I?"

"You. I believed that you were the mistress of Ernest Hardwick."

"You believed that?"

"Yes, I tell you. And he led me to believe it. But as I was more useful to him, from my possession of property, than you, a beggar, could be, he was willing to resign you for me, and I punished what I believed to be his perfidy to me by making him write these letters. Oh, he was well paid for every one. I always paid my debts. Each of those letters cost me gold."

And she lay back, and closed her eyes, exhausted with the last effort, and Laura gazed upon her—gazed as one spell-bound.

Mrs. Berry made no sign for some time, and her stillness might have induced the idea that she had fainted. But when Laura, now eager to escape from her presence, moved towards the door, the dying woman opened her eyes, and said,

"Stay."

"Why should I stay?"

"Have you no thanks to me for a disclosure which has saved your reputation, by the sacrifice of my own?"

"Do you look for thanks, after the confession of a wrong so wicked that I can hardly bring myself to believe that one woman would inflict it on another?

Make your peace with Heaven, Mrs. Berry, for indeed you have need of pardon."

"You do not offer me *your* pardon, then?"

"It would be a grievous hypocrisy."

"Yes, it would. Under the same circumstances, I would never have forgiven you. I would have revenged myself."

"I do not think of revenge. Let me leave you."

"Yes, go and take counsel with your sister. Has she given you her confidence?"

"I do not understand," said Laura. "I do not wish to understand."

"That is untrue. I have told you that it has pleased my husband, in his singular zeal for yours, to let Mrs. Hawkesley know that which Mr. Berry, had he the feelings of ordinary men, would have died rather than have told. I doubted whether he had gone so far until your sister entered this room, but I have read her face, and I doubt no longer. What has she told you of me?"

"Nothing, but that—"

"Do not hesitate. I can bear it."

What else passed between the two women in that chamber of death needs not now be told.

The sisters returned to London.

"You will write to Paris to-night?" said Beatrice.

"Yes, I *will* write," said Laura, slowly, and as if the resolution was but half formed.

But it was needless, for, before the evening, Mr. Hawkesley arrived, with Arthur Lygon.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THAT evening Ernest Adair also met an acquaintance whom he had not expected to see again so soon—if ever.

He had lost no time in obeying the orders of M. Wolowski, had engaged a small room in one of the obscure streets between the Regent's Park and the great thoroughfare which lies to the west, and giving the people of the house an impression that he was a theatrical artist, and that his visitors would be connected with some place of amusement —thereby taking a character which, if the owner be tolerably solvent, is exceedingly popular among the lower class of lodging-house keepers—Adair, too restless to remain at home, made his way, and it was a long one, to the eastern side of the city. There he lingered, tolerably certain of meeting no friends in the strange, bustling population of that district. About the wide, old, squalid, yet prosperous quarter, Ernest Adair wandered, and sought to interest himself in its noisy and multifarious commerce, in its open-air banqueting, and in its frequent quarrels, which the large infusion of a sailor-constituency somewhat relieved from mere ruffianism, and rendered a matter of course, amid the revelling, fiddling, and unceremonious love-

making with which our sea-labourers beguile their leisure ashore. Adair had stopped, and been hemmed in by an unsavoury crowd that promptly gathered to behold a savage conflict between two fine-looking men who had, five minutes before, been affectionately forcing their money upon one another, but whom the demonstrative coquetry of a Cynthia of the minute had roused into jealous and vindictive rage. The fight was at its fiercest, and Adair was so far interested as to struggle for his place in the front, when a voice behind him said,

"Bah! that's child's play; you cannot care for that, Monsieur Adair. The fools have knives, and don't use them."

Adair turned, and saw a coarsely-built man, with something of the foreign sailor about him, and whose long black hair and ear-rings, and the bull-neck below, suddenly recalled a scene of violence, the recollection of which had almost been extinguished by grimmer memories of more recent date.

"But he hits well, the fair-haired fellow," continued the other. "Only they have drunk too much to be mischievous. We should not drink when we quarrel, unless we mean to use cold steel, Monsieur Adair, should we?"

"You in England, Haureau?" said Adair.

"Why not. England is as open to me as to you, I suppose?"

"I don't know," said Adair contemptuously, and

affecting to watch the combat even more eagerly than before.

But it was soon over. Cynthia, who had needed a few moments to make adequate reply to the fierce reproaches of her female friends, enraged that a lucrative evening seemed likely to be broken up through a ridiculous sentimentality, had clawed away the bonnet from one, and dashed a handful of oyster-shells into the face of another, and having thus repudiated their interference, threw herself between the combatants, and with that curious distortion of mouth which among women of the inferior class indicates pathos, weepingly implored the champions to desist. Even to such tears as hers the sailor nature is very compassionate, and the men began to regard one another in a maudlin and reproachful way, which made it clear to every dissatisfied spectator that in two minutes more they would be drinking together with horrible oaths of everlasting friendship. Adair withdrew himself from the murmuring crowd, and proceeded on his way, when Haureau came up beside him.

"What do you mean by the answer you made just now?"

"What answer?"

"You said that you did not know that England was as open to me as to yourself."

"Nor do I, nor do I care?"

And he walked on at a quickened pace. But though the powerful limbs of his companion were

short, his power of step was great, and he easily kept abreast of Adair.

"Don't speak to me in that fashion, Monsieur Adair. I have earned the right to be used more civilly."

"I have nothing to say to you—you can have nothing to say to me—let us take our own ways."

"Mine happens to be yours—yes, and whatever yours may happen to be," added Haureau, as Ernest turned round. "Now."

"Then you have something to say. What is it?"

"I am not to be bullied, that is the first thing, Adair," said the other familiarly. "Don't try that game. What," he added, with a coarse laugh, "you were actually looking at that clown in police clothes—were you thinking of asking him to deliver a gentleman from the importunities of a low ruffian, who insists on addressing him? *Dieu*, what an aristo we have become since we used to fraternise with barbers, and that kind of *canaille!*"

"*Canaille*, as you say," replied Ernest, with as offensive a sneer as he could assume.

And with the air of one who is compelled to endure, he lit a cigar, and leaned against one of the rails which in that region fence the outlying merchandise of the shopkeepers.

"Thank you!" said Haureau, dexterously snatching the cigar at the moment of its illumination, and transferring it to his own lips.

Adair smiled, and lit another, as calmly as if no such insult had been practised on him.

"What, not angry!" said Haureau, emitting a large puff of smoke. "The English air agrees with your temper."

"Angry! With you, or with *him*, perhaps?" replied Adair, quietly, and gently pushing away with his foot a dog that came up against him.

The retort stung Haureau, who showed his sumptuous white teeth with anything but a pleasant smile.

"You have no business, I tell you, to be so rough with me. I don't speak of the little affair at Silvain's," and he laid his brawny hand on the arm that Adair had wounded. "That *you* might remember, but I don't care to speak of. But I was waiting to be your friend on another occasion, Monsieur Adair, when you would have been more pleased to see me than you look at present."

"I am not aware of it."

"Don't tell lies, because I know you saw me. You see everything, even cards that you don't like. And on a certain day when you thought that two if not three strong-bodied Englishmen were coming to settle an account with you, I know that you were not sorry to see me standing about, ready to take a friend's part if needful."

"I suppose that you were ready to help me, or to strike me down from behind my back, as those who hired you might order."

"Perhaps I was, but then I never strike without

orders, like some people, and in consequence I can walk about this town in freedom instead of skulking in quarters which I hate. That's near the mark, Monsieur Adair."

"I am leading the life of a *galley-slave*, eh?" said Adair, giving point to his words by a savage look. "I must not walk out of my yard. Very well. I am sure of your sympathy, Monsieur Haureau?"

"You are a brave fellow, Ernest Adair," replied his companion. "I always said that, and I never knew how right I was till now."

"Deeply obliged by the compliment. Have you any more compliments, or may we break off this interesting conversation?"

"We do not part in this way. We can be useful to one another, and I am sure that you will be glad of it. Where are your lodgings? I was thinking of proposing to come and stop with you."

"Ah!"

"That means that you don't feel inclined to give me a strong recommendation to your landlord. You do not like responsibility. That is prudent. But I have plenty of money, see." And he thrust his large hand into his pocket and drew out a handful of gold. "I will pay in advance, if that is preferred."

Something in his tone told Adair more than his words.

"If you want my address," said Ernest, "I dare say that it will be furnished to you in good time.

As I have private business to attend to, I will wait your visit instead of inviting you."

"That is rude and inhospitable. We sailors feel hurt by that sort of thing more than I can tell you."

"I am sorry," said Ernest, knocking off the ashes of his cigar.

"You do not ask me home, then?"

"Why should I?"

"Because, if the gentleman to whom you have sent your address should call, and you should not be at home, it will be very convenient that another gentleman should be there to apologise for your disobedience to the orders given you in the garret where your hands were held behind your back."

"Why not have saved trouble by saying so at first?" said Adair, calmly.

"I hoped that your kind and noble feelings would have made you show a more friendly spirit. I wish you were a good fellow as well as a brave one, we should be such excellent companions."

"My address is Beevor Street, Marylebone, my number is 16, and my room is the second-floor front. My name is Hyde, and the name of the landlord of the house is Wallis," said Ernest Adair, walking away.

"Stop, Mr. Hyde."

"What more do you wish to know?"

"Have you sent that address to the person who was to have it?"

"Yes."

"How did you send it?"

"I left it at his office with my own hand."

"At what time?"

"An hour ago."

"He will not receive it until to-morrow, then, and a night is lost. There is some question of life or death in the matter. You are prepared to answer for the consequences of the delay?"

"I could not send an address until I had one."

"I have nothing to say to that."

"That is fortunate," said Ernest Adair, haughtily. He had borne much, but the discovery that Haureau had been placed in charge of him, galled Adair almost beyond expression. He had injured and insulted the man, and the reprisals which the coarse nature of Haureau would certainly inflict, now that he had an opportunity, promised to be more offensive to Adair than the cold cynicism of his Parisian colleagues. But he was in the chain, and the taskmaster was behind him with the whip.

"I shall have something to say about that when we meet at our happy breakfast," said Haureau. "I do not invite myself to supper, because suppers are not an English fashion, I am told, and because I have something to amuse me in this part of the world. Is it any use asking you to join me? You can do no good at home, as your letter is lying in that lawyer's box, and you may as well spend a pleasant night."

"I am going home."

"Yes, I hardly hoped to tempt the aristocrat, by

offering him our humble amusements, and yet I could make you known, Adair, to some very good fellows, who would receive you warmly."

"I understand you. Let them find me out for themselves. I dare say they will be able to do so when it is necessary."

"No doubt. But I think you are a fool. Pardon my rough tongue, or don't pardon it, just as you like, it is all the same to me. Only I would ask you what good in the devil's name you think to do yourself by riding the high horse, and pretending to be anything but what you are? At least, what's the good of it with me? Do you think that I have anything to learn about you?"

The speech was brutal in tone and in words, and Adair replied with bitter contempt,

"Do you conceive it possible that I care one farthing, Haureau, what you know or think about me? I thought I made it pretty clear to you just now," and he repeated the action he had used as the dog passed, "that I do not. But while I have a choice between my own society, and that of a gang of low ruffians, I shall avail myself of that choice. Make the best of that statement when you make your report to your master."

"I like you better than I ever thought to do. I swear I do, and I am devilishly sorry that you have shown yourself a brave fellow. I don't want to get to care about you, but your spirit is honourable, and I respect it. By G——, I should be glad to see you escape, after all."

"You are very good."

"No, I am not. But I have seen a good deal of fighting-life in my time, and a good deal of cowardice, and a fellow that can turn to bay, when the rope is round his neck—round his neck, did I say?—when the men below have hold of the rope, and are only waiting the gun to run him up aloft—I say that fellow is made for better things. I swear to you, Adair, that if you think I bear malice about this hole in my arm, you are out. I don't care for it a curse. I have had a worse cut from a screaming woman, when we had boarded, and cut down the crew, and were paying ourselves for our trouble. I bear no malice, and, though business is business, I'll stand by you if I can."

And the ruffian and pirate, or whatever he had been, spoke with all the earnestness of his coarse nature.

"You can do nothing for me, Haureau," said Adair. "Do your duty, but let me alone as far as you can."

"I would do *that*," said Haureau, "but there's no latitude allowed me, my fine fellow. You are a dangerous man, and I don't let you give me the slip."

"Wolowski must be a fool," said Ernest Adair, very angrily. "A fool," he added, with an oath. "When a rat's in a trap, what need of poking at him?"

"Some rats have sharp teeth, and gnaw their way through the best traps, Monsieur Adair, and I

take it that your teeth are among the sharpest. But that's not my business. As for our friend being a fool, that may be, and in one respect I know he is, and you know it, too, or I am mistaken."

"About Chantal?"

"Yes, and another."

"I do not know the other."

"Yes, you do. It was always a weakness of yours to be sweet on the women. So it was mine, in a way, in days when I had the means of showing it," and he laughed a laugh that perhaps meant a recollection of many a day of wickedness and cruelty. "You know the other."

"A woman?"

"A girl, then, which is nearly as bad as a woman. To hear her say Papa Wolowski, so pleasantly, one would not think that she had false keys to all his drawers and boxes, or that she made a copy of his private cipher, and sold it to his master. I don't blame her, mind you. She don't know whether she is his daughter, or not; but she knows right well that the chief of the bureau is quite too much of a gentleman to give her false diamonds for real ones."

Ernest Adair's face lighted up with actual pleasure.

"What?" he said, with almost a scream in his voice. "What?"

It was not in the nature of the population of that district to hear a question without replying, and quick, if low, was the answer given, impromptu,

by a passer-by, and loud was his laugh at his own ribaldry.

"Beast!" said Adair, but uttered in good temper. The fellow looked round, but the figure of Haureau did not exactly invite insult, so the other went on his way.

"Do you tell me," said Adair, coming close up to Haureau, "that the demoiselle Madelon—"

"I thought you were such friends with M. ——, that he told you everything. But he keeps a woman's secrets, I suppose."

"She sells Wólowski!" said Adair, exultingly. "O yes, her father; he is her father, there is no doubt of that. *Dieu!* if the brute can feel, he will like that. Good little Madelon! — good little girl! I love you, Madelon!"

"Don't say that. It may make M. —— jealous."

"Ha! and Chantal, too, who is engaged to be married to her—he will be a happy man, the good Chantal!"

"I've told you pleasant news, then, Monsieur Adair?"

"Yes," said Adair, fiercely, "you have told me pleasant news, and if you care to be thanked, I thank you. I had given up all hope that I should ever have a chance of stinging that cold-blooded villain, and here, in the middle of my ruin and helplessness, you come with news that he will be stung to the very quick by the only person he cares about in this world. That is good news, Haureau."

"Go home," said Haureau, with a kindly oath, "I don't want to like you, I tell you, and you are making me do it. Now you speak like a man. Go home. I will see as little as I must of you, and whereas I was coming to breakfast to-morrow morning, I will be damned if I come near you. Can I speak more friendly than that?"

"Where are you going now?"

"I can show you, but I can't tell you."

"Show me then, for I won't sleep till I have drunk to the health of Madelon Wolowski. I'll go with you, Haureau, no matter whom we go to meet."

"A gang of low ruffians," quoted Haureau.

"Very likely, but they'll not refuse my toast."

"Not if you proposed the health of M. Satan."

Haureau thrust his huge arm across the arm of Ernest Adair, and they plunged into an abyss of narrow and evil-smelling streets, and made their way towards the river.

CHAPTER XXX.

So, for the first time during the period of our story, husband and wife were under the same roof.

At the sound of wheels Mrs. Hawkesley had rushed to the door, had received the affectionate kiss of her husband, and had received Arthur with unusual warmth. Then she hurried the two men into the library.

"You know that Laura is here," she said to Lygon.

"I expected to hear it," was the calm reply.

Beatrice looked at him wistfully, and then said—

"Charles, I must tell all, though I had meant to tell you first. Charles dearest, and Arthur, I have such good news for you, for us all."

And her eyes fairly ran over as she spoke.

"It has all been a wicked, base, conspiracy. All is confessed. The letters are forgeries, the horrible letters that imposed on poor Robert. Forgeries, by that wicked woman at Lipthwaite, helped by the villain Adair. She is on her death-bed, Charles, and she has confessed it all. I was there, and heard her. Arthur! do you hear me, forgeries? Charles, why is he not on his knees, thanking God?"

"He will answer for himself, Beatrice," said Charles Hawkesley, gravely.

"Arthur!" exclaimed Mrs. Hawkesley.

"This is Mrs. Berry's confession, do I understand you aright?" said Lygon, in a low voice, but without agitation or excitement.

"Yes, yes. This very day. We have been at Lipthwaite together, Laura and myself, and it has all been told. Mr. Berry was present, and has made notes of what she said. Arthur! Why do you stand so coldly looking at me? Laura is in the room above."

She spoke as if she expected him to make one rush from the room to the arms of his wife. But he did not move.

"Is he too much astounded to speak, Charles?" said the impetuous Beatrice, turning to her husband. "Is the happiness too much for him? Let him divide it with Laura."

And she turned to the door, and then looked back at the faces of her companions.

"What does this mean?" she asked. "Is there any new sorrow come upon us? No! I have my husband, you and Laura are here, and all the children are well—what harm can the world do us? Charles, why are you silent?"

"I see all that your kind heart means, Beatrice," said Lygon. "It is sad to have to answer you as I must do. You have believed that all was over, and that after my hearing what you had to tell me my happiness would be restored to me. This cannot be."

"Cannot be?"

"I will not now discuss a painful subject. I have put your husband in full possession of my views, and he will explain them to you."

"Explain!—I want only one word. Laura is in the house, and that wicked evidence against her is scattered to the winds—why is she not in your arms?"

"Be calmer, dear Beatrice," said Charles Hawkesley. "There is, unhappily, a feeling which is not to be removed by your appeal—it has not been removed by graver arguments. Arthur must take his own course."

"He shall hear his wife, however!" said Beatrice, agitated, and going to the door.

"Stay, Beatrice," said her husband.

"You, too, tell me to stay? What *is* this?"

"Do you think I would stop you for a second, if it were not necessary? Arthur, will you tell my wife why it is necessary?"

"He has offended *you*, I see," said Beatrice, quickly.

"He has grieved me. But that is not worth a word. Let him tell you—or shall I say it for him?—that no reconciliation with Laura is possible."

"Arthur—are you mad?"

"Not so mad, Beatrice," said Arthur Lygon, in cold, measured speech, "as to risk my life's happiness twice."

"Risk! You are speaking of my sister."

"I am speaking of my wife, even a better guarantee, Beatrice, that I should not speak lightly."

"You will break her heart!" exclaimed Beatrice, passionately.

"It will not be so."

"Oh, Arthur! it must be my fault. In my hurry and eagerness to tell you the good news, I have told it badly, and you do not quite understand me. Dear Arthur! Mrs. Berry, the wife of your friend, is dying, and confesses to having forged the letters on which Laura was condemned. You have understood me now," she sobbed, "fly up to her, dear soul, and assure her that she is to be happy again. What *is* it, Charles?" she added, piteously.

"I hope that Laura will long be happy," said Lygon; "but her happiness will be separated from mine."

"That it can never be."

"It could be once, and it had been well for us all if—if we had not been parties to a fearful mistake. But we will not make it a second time."

"For Heaven's sake, Arthur, tell me what you mean! Do you not believe this story which I have told you, this confession of a dying woman? If you could have heard the solemn way in which it was uttered—"

"I know it to be true."

"Bless you for saying that! Then what more is there between you and Laura? You have freed her from that wicked charge—what more?"

"That wicked charge! Beatrice, had that been all, how mad must Laura's conduct have seemed? They were bungling forgers, those wretches. Had

their letters been all that could be brought against Laura, she would have laughed them to scorn. The villain who wrote them, and his accomplice, knew little of their business. Until I had seen copies of the letters, I hardly knew what to believe, but half a dozen pages sufficed for me. Copies have been shown me, and my only marvel is that poor Urquhart could have been deluded into the belief that such letters could have come from the pen of a woman whom I had called wife."

"She *could* not have written them?" said Beatrice, with tears running down her glowing cheeks.

"She could not. No English matron, whose taste as well as her heart had not been debauched by vice, could have written them—they are worthy the hands of a low profligate like Adair, and a half-mad and wholly bad woman like Mrs. Berry. Had those been the only evidences, Laura would have trampled the accusation under her feet, and have left her vengeance to me. I tell you, Beatrice, one glance at *those* letters was enough."

"Then what remains?"

"The other letters, which Laura is afraid to disavow. The letters that show she has loved and been loved, and by a man whom she has not wedded. It was for those letters that Laura went to France, and the story which they reveal is the story that parts us for ever."

"My God, Arthur Lygon! The mother of your children! Because when she was a girl, scarcely more than a child, she fancied herself in love with

some boy who has long been dead, but who has much longer been forgotten by her."

"I know not whether the object of her love be dead, or be alive, nor is it of importance. She was a woman when she wrote those letters, and she loved the man to whom they were written. Had I known it, she had never been my wife. As it is, she is my wife no longer. Let those words suffice."

"Charles!" gasped Mrs. Hawkesley, "are you a party to this madness, this cruelty? No, I am sure you are not."

"I am not."

"He is not—I will not pause over your words, Beatrice—let me say that your husband is unable to understand my feelings, and has laboured with a zeal which ought to do more than satisfy you, to convince me that it is my duty to accept such love as Mrs. Lygon can offer me, and for the sake of the children to forget the deceit of the mother."

"And was it *so*, Charles, that you urged the case of Laura?"

"Again I ask Arthur to reply."

"I see," said Lygon, "I have expressed my own feelings, not his. He is pleased almost to ridicule my feelings, and to condemn me for what he cannot understand. At the risk of offending you, Beatrice, I clear him from the blame you would give him."

"And God bless you, Charles," said his wife. "To you, Arthur, what can I say, if you have shut your heart to such pleading as that which speaks

for the mother of your children? This is indeed a new affliction, and I was presumptuous enough to say that there could be no more for us. Arthur, if ever woman loved deeply and truly, it is Laura. She has been devoted to you, and so proud of you that even when things have been said at which other wives might have taken fire—I might and should—I own it—Laura has been silent in her scorn of them—she knew you, and that was enough. If you could not see her love in her whole life, if you wanted the incessant assurance of it, indeed, Arthur, you did not deserve such a treasure as Laura. But even then you might think of her as a mother, and ask yourself whether one who so idolised her children, who watched over them with such perfect and patient love, had no place for their father in her large, warm, true heart. Oh, you know not what wild, wicked folly has entered your brain, what bitter tears you will one day pay for having been so wilfully blind."

"I honour your sisterly love, Beatrice; in return, believe in my suffering. Now we will say no more on this. I had wished to spare you such an interview, but I was forced by your husband to consent to meet you. You have said nothing that I was not prepared to hear—do you need to be told that I would give my right hand to feel as you would wish me to feel?"

"See Laura," sobbed Beatrice.

"Why inflict needless pain? She cannot desire to see me, after what has passed, and it is better for

both that we should make our arrangements through others. Your sister, Beatrice, will have no reason to complain of me. I leave all in the hands of Charles and yourself."

"Arthur, she will die."

"Spare such appeals, Beatrice, because they force from me answers which I am grieved to make."

"She will die."

Arthur Lygon made no answer.

"Yes, Arthur," said Beatrice, "it is true. But I will not say that her heart should break for one who has shown how little he deserves her love. You will destroy her in another way."

"Beatrice!"

"Yes. Those children whom she adores—"

"A word, Beatrice. Are you already so unjust towards me? Are you suspecting me of an intention to avenge myself—to repay Laura for her deceit, to punish her, in short? Think better of me. Your husband will tell you how far was such an idea from my mind—ask him."

"It is due to Lygon," said Hawkesley, "to say that his own resolution, taken without a word on the subject from me, is to leave to Laura the entire custody of the three children, with the single condition that they visit him when he desires it."

"Or at times of her own appointment—when she can best part with them," added Mr. Lygon.

"And men make law for women, and understand them no better!" exclaimed Beatrice Hawkesley.

"Oh, Arthur, how little do you know Laura. How, if God is good to you—better to you than you deserve—you will look back with shame and humiliation upon what you have said to-day. Charles, dearest, I am not accusing you—it was not your province to know the depth of that loving heart, and yet you know it more truly than he who should have treasured it like his life. The custody of the children is to be entrusted to Laura," she repeated, bitterly. "Oh, if you knew! And you shall know it," she added impetuously, "and I care not what follows."

Beatrice hurried from the room.

"Do not reproach yourself, Charles," said Lygon. "You did what you deemed right in bringing me here."

"If I reproach myself, Arthur, it is because I am helping you to inflict pain where it is undeserved," said Hawkesley. "I am in my own house, or I might say more."

The door opened, and Mrs. Hawkesley led in Laura to the presence of her husband.

She was pale as snow, and she trembled visibly.

One glance, it was scarcely furtive, and yet timid as the look of a girl. She saw the worn and weary look on the handsome features of her husband, and then her eyes were turned away and sought his no more. She had read enough, in failing to find that which woman reads with a glance of lightning.

Arthur Lygon bent his head in silence.

Mrs. Hawkesley spoke, and it was almost with

solemnity—in a tone very rare in that cheery, kindly voice:

"Do not let us take one step more in a course which has begun in error, but which should not end in misery. Surely it is enough that one of three sisters is a miserable widow, through a fatal persistence in mystery and wrong. At least let the dead be mourned for, before we heap new sorrow on the living. Arthur, and Charles, I have brought Laura here, not that anything may be unsaid that has been said in this room to-night, but that you may understand something that was said by me. Arthur, your wife was in this house this morning, and refused to let me send for her children. Those children are in the house now, and their mother has not seen them."

"May I—may I not see them, Arthur?" said Laura, faintly.

"My God!" said Arthur Lygon, pained to the very heart at her tone. "Why have you not seen them? Why do you not see them? Could I know this?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Hawkesley.

"Beatrice!" said Lygon, in astonishment.

"Let me speak for her," said Beatrice. "Let nothing come from her lips that can add to the painful recollections of this time. How painful they will be, even when we are all happy, who can tell? Arthur, you do not need to be told how a mother's heart is throbbing to feel her children pressing to it—*you* love them, but what is a father's love to a mother's?"

"Why are they not with her?" replied Arthur Lygon, almost angrily.

"Because Laura will not look upon the faces of her children—yes, and you may sever them if you will, until her heart has broken—but she will not see her children until her husband has forgiven an error which, when she dares, she will explain—which meant, as he will one day believe, that she loved him too well to be wise."

"*May* I see my children, Arthur?" said a sweet voice, broken by sobs.

He was silent for a few moments, and the sob of his wife came upon his ear.

"I have long since forgiven," said Arthur Lygon.

Laura raised her head, and one look, such as should have been on his face, would have brought her with one rush to his arms. But the look was not there. She did not move.

"I have fully forgiven," repeated Arthur. "Let the children come."

Mrs. Hawkesley had not waited for the second word. A hurried cry of young voices without, a wilder cry from a mother's voice within, and for a moment, at least, that mother was happy.

CHAPTER XXXI.

WHILE Laura was in the close embrace of her children, her husband silently left the room, casting upon the loving group an earnest glance which did not escape the vigilant eye of Beatrice.

He made a sign to Charles Hawkesley to follow him. But it was Beatrice who came out and closed the door.

"Come with me," she said to Arthur.

He followed her to the drawing-room.

"You wish to speak to Charles," she said, "but it is far better that you should speak to me, Arthur. Already there is coldness between you and him, and you are both falling back upon your pride and dignity, and five minutes more may separate you for life. You cannot quarrel with me, Arthur, and you cannot offend me. Speak to *me*."

"I had but little to say to him, Beatrice, and that little was simply matter of business. But I will write."

"Write! About what?"

"About future arrangements."

"Arrangements. What *is* a man's nature? He has still in his eyes the image of his children clinging round the neck of their mother, who is crying out her poor heart between happiness, and doubt,

and misery, and he walks from the room and talks of arrangements. Do men ever love us, Arthur? Do you know what it is to love us?"

"Let me write to Charles, Beatrice," said Lygon, in a troubled voice, "and let me go."

"I will not try to stop you. If what you have just seen cannot do that, my words will be of little avail. Yes, dear Arthur, tell me that you called Charles to bid him draw the children away, and send her in here to you, for one moment, for one moment. O, Arthur, make us happy, make *her* happy, and God bless you for ever."

"There is no happiness but in truth and trust," said Arthur Lygon. "Sobs and tears are but hollow substitutes for those. When the sobs are hushed and the tears are dry, then begins again the doubt and the hypocrisy. I will not doom myself to such a life. Farewell, Beatrice, it may be long before we meet again, but be sure that I shall never forget your affection. Farewell."

She detained him by the hand he had placed in hers.

"It is so. Yourself," she said, almost bitterly. "You think of no one but yourself. This selfishness is fearful—yes, and it is contemptible, too."

"Beatrice!"

"I tell you that you cannot quarrel with *me*. I can stand before you and charge you with contemptible cowardice, and you cannot strike me—you cannot even insult me in return. Yes, I have the advantage, and I use it. Arthur, the time of your

own trial has come, and you prove unworthy. Poor Laura!"

"I can only be silent, Beatrice, and leave you."

"Your tongue may be silent, but your heart, such as it is, owns that I am speaking the truth. And when you have gone away, and the flush of anger is over, you will accuse yourself in the very words I have spoken. Do not forget them, Arthur. I have said that you are a coward."

"I will forget all, except that a sister made a last and desperate effort on behalf of her sister—to preserve that sister in her position in the world."

"Arthur," exclaimed Beatrice, passionately, "such bitter words were on my lips—they shall not be spoken—no, thank God, I have mastered myself—there. But you are very wicked."

"Be it so, and let me go."

"Her position in the world! There is one position in this world, and but one for which Laura cares, and for which at this moment she would joyfully give twenty years of a life that ought to be too happy for her willingly to shorten it. That, and all the world could offer, she would give to find her head on your breast, and to hear you whisper her name. You know it, you are owning it to your God at this moment, and you are too cowardly to open that door, and with one word bring a happy creature to your arms."

"Why do you harp on the most offensive word you can find?" said Arthur, angrily.

"Because it is the truest. Even while you speak

you are proving it. You are striving to close your heart against me, and fastening on that word."

"Cowardly!" repeated Arthur, slowly.

"Yes. You are afraid of yourself. You, who have been proud, and have had a right to be proud of your calm, silent courage, who have shown yourself too really brave to be foolishly impetuous, who have faced the troubles and trials of years, and have conquered them all, you are now afraid of yourself, and of your own thoughts. I read your heart, Arthur, as if it were my own, and I almost hate you for a meanness that will send Laura to her grave."

"I must not answer you."

"Oh, if you could, we should all be so happy! But you cannot."

"In part you are right, Beatrice, and it is painful to me to own that you are right, because that accuses one of whom I wish to speak only with kindness. I see my course before me; I have convinced myself that it is just, and I should indeed feel ashamed hereafter, if my conscience could tell me that I weakly gave way. That is cowardice of which I own I am guilty."

"What weak, miserable, stilted words! and yet they are the right ones, Arthur, for uttering a miserable pretence. If we are never to meet again, do not let us part with a falsehood between us—a cruel, shallow falsehood."

"*You* have heard none."

"Do not say so. Dear Arthur, you talk of

justice; be just to yourself, and to us all. It is of no such mocking folly that you are afraid. It is of your own nature. You are proud, sensitive, and yor have learned to be suspicious—there, do not speak —I know what you would answer to that word."

"That the lesson has been wantonly forced on me," said Arthur, sternly. "It was none of my seeking—suspicion was no part of the nature which you describe so vindictively, Beatrice. Ask Laura. Her goings-out and her comings-in were uncontrolled by me; her friends, her letters, her secrets were her own. I had made her my wife, and in that word was absolute, unquestioning faith. Suddenly a whole history of treachery is thrust before my eyes, and *that* image, Beatrice, will outlive all others."

"Yes, you speak the truth, now," said Beatrice, sadly.

"And what are you asking, or what is she stooping to ask through you? That a husband who loved her better than life, and believed her worthy of his love, and who can say, as if he were speaking his last words, that never for one waking hour of their married life was she absent from his mind, and who never let a day pass without some act, it might be a trifle, it might be more, for her comfort, or her amusement—you are asking that this husband, alienated by her own deceit, shall affect to receive her home as he would have welcomed her from some holiday, and shall pretend to re-people his home and his heart with all the loving thoughts of old days, with all that she swept remorselessly away

in an endeavour to conceal her treachery. This Beatrice Hawkesley stoops to ask of me, that her sister may continue to live in her husband's house, and go out into the world under the protection of his name. You scoff at a man's pride, Beatrice, but what is a woman's?"

"Her love, which, Arthur, you have never comprehended—and which, I judge from your words, you never will comprehend. For the sake of that deep, true love of Laura's, I can bear with your language, wounding as it is, and as it is intended to be. Yes, we stoop to ask what you have said we ask. We accept this at your hands, and not sullenly, Arthur, but with humble gratitude, and we will wait for the day when you shall thank those who accepted your grudged and contemptuous pity. Even on those terms, Arthur, and with such low thoughts on your part of the motives that lead us, I beg you to receive back my sister to your home."

"I scarcely believe that I hear the voice of Beatrice Hawkesley," said Arthur, speaking low.

"No," said Beatrice, "you hear the voice of your wife. I speak at her bidding, and, if you will, believe her at your knees, asking what I have asked in her name."

"Beatrice, the time is too solemn for trifling. I have known you as a high-minded and truthful woman. I hold your husband responsible for the truth of what you say to me."

"He will accept the responsibility."

"And if I ask you, in the name of all that you hold sacred—"

"In the most sacred name of all, if you will."

"If I ask you whether this appeal is made to me at Laura's prayer—whether she desires, without one more word of the past, to return to my house and resume her place there—you hear me, without one word of the past—if I ask you, *that,* Beatrice?"

"I answer you, Yes."

"Remember what I have said—remember it now and for ever, Beatrice?"

"Until you bid me forget it."

"I hear," said Arthur, in an agitated voice, "what, an hour ago, no earthly persuasion could have made me believe would have been uttered by living lips."

"And there has been a time, this very day, Arthur, when I believed it as impossible. But you have heard me, and you grant the prayer that I have made?"

The voice of Beatrice seemed forced and unmusical, and he looked earnestly at her.

"If I judge rightly, Beatrice, it was not counsel of yours that has impelled my wife to take this course."

"Of mine? No," she answered, slowly. "It was no counsel of mine. I love my husband, dearly, deeply, with all my heart and soul. Perhaps I am wicked to speak of the possibility of an hour that could part us—there is but one, I bless God when I say it, that ever can. But if such an hour had come,

I dare not say that, deep and true as is my love for him—well, I might have strength given me for such a trial—but I will not now say that what I have been bidden to ask for Laura I would ask for myself."

"You would not?"

"I dare not say that I would."

"Beatrice, in my turn, let me say that I dare not ask what this abjectness of submission means."

"Means?" repeated Beatrice, piteously.

"Yes, the question comes to me with fearful promptness—"

Beatrice Hawkesley uttered a cry—almost a wild cry—and her hand was upon his lips.

"In the name of God! for the love of your children, wicked, foolish man, be silent! Down with all thoughts but one! Oh, Arthur! down with all devilish thoughts, and pray, pray for the power to understand something of a woman's love. She flings herself before you, she prays you to take her home—she, Laura, the proudest of us all—she begs you to forgive her, and with that head bending before you, and that proud heart stooping for pardon, are you so miserable—Oh, Arthur, it is not, it cannot be so!—are you so unhappy as to be unconvinced of her love? Does the God that gave such a woman to your heart deny you the power of knowing how you are blessed?"

Beatrice's tears came to her relief; but, as she leant upon the arm of Arthur, he felt that her agitation was fearful.

"What am I to say?" he uttered, mechanically.

"Say?" answered Beatrice, in a voice choking with sobs. "Call *her!*"

"Either I am mad," said Arthur, wildly, "or God has kept such a blessing for me as I have never deserved. Which is it, Beatrice?" he exclaimed, passionately, imperatively, as if the decision were with the agitated woman who looked up to him with a glowing face, stained with tears.

"Go to her," sobbed Beatrice.

"I *will!*" he answered.

He turned to the door.

"No, let her come to you."

At least he thought he heard some such words: but there was a woman's voice, and a figure hastily crossing the room, and something of a struggle, as of a wife who sought to kneel, but was indignantly caught up to a husband's bosom, and held strongly there, and all that could be borne in the way of pardon given in a kiss, and that kiss forgotten in a long embrace of love.

He would never have remembered that any such words had come to him, but that she murmured a word or two—how long afterwards he knew not, but they were alone in that drawing-room.

"I want to speak—darling—one word—I will speak."

"Not now."

"Yes, now, and never again. Will you ever think me proud any more?"

"Yes."

"Not when I tell you that I was listening at the door. Oh! if you had—"

But the sentence was never finished.

As for Beatrice, she again behaved that night in a way so unworthy of a dignified British matron that I do not altogether like to set down the particulars. The only sort of excuse that can be offered for her is, that all the rest of the party seemed to be almost equally unmindful of the proprieties of life. I pass over the excitement of the children, which was shared, to a certain extent, by their cousins, and the merciful removal of all those household blessings, after various ineffectual attempts, and the restoration of quiet in the apartment in which the Hawkesleys and the Lygons were assembled. That Arthur Lygon should say little was natural, and that Laura, having seated herself upon a footstool beside his knee, should content herself with holding his hand, and studying her wedding-ring (which seemed to have some strange attraction for her eyes, and yet it was but a common guinea affair too), and taking very little notice of anybody, was perhaps also pardonable enough. Charles Hawkesley seemed impressed with the idea that a great deal was expected from him, and that it fell upon him to maintain the conversation of the evening, and with the best possible intentions he started topic upon topic, delivered a speech upon each, and when he had fairly worn it out, took another, and acquitted himself upon that with equal fluency and equal failure to produce the slightest response. He also

acted on the same principle in regard to his hospitalities, and brought out bottle after bottle of wine, of all kinds, poured out glasses thereof, and set them before the others. Nobody took much, but this did not discourage Hawkesley, who continued to talk and to bring out wine as if he were actuated by some concealed machinery of a hospitable character, and had been set going for the good of society. But Mrs. Hawkesley made herself perfectly ridiculous. How many times she kissed Laura's forehead, in a straightforward way, and how many times she took advantage of her sister's position to come behind her, and hold her head, or touch her shoulders, or give some similar intimation of satisfaction, I cannot say. This might be forgiven, as also might her standing before Arthur and contemplating him kindly, and then walking right away to her husband, and kissing him in the very middle of a speech about Mr. Gladstone's financial scheme, or the National Gallery, or something that neither he nor any of his audience just then cared one farthing about. But why she should have disappeared after a time, without assigning a cause, and then should have made her re-appearance, at intervals, each time bringing down either her own baby, in its night-clothes, or Walter, in the garb of a *débardeur*, or Clara in some hastily assumed garment, and slippers, but no stockings, or Freddy, in extreme *déshabille* (it was hard work to get him away, and he had to be bribed with wine), and then varying the performance by calmly bringing in her

own baby again, as if nothing had happened, she has never been able to explain, and Charles Hawkesley teases her to this day upon her perseverance, that night, in rehearsing a sort of private Resurrection of the Nuns by instalments. But nobody seemed surprised, and Laura and Arthur, each holding a hand of any child presented to them, would have held it, I believe, until morning, if Hawkesley had not occasionally taken it away, to make room, as he said, for more novelties which were then getting up.

There had been another watcher that evening, another listener at doors, but one who had watched and listened for another purpose than that of reconciliation.

Irritable, impatient, impenitent Bertha had with difficulty endured the solitude of that day. There had been little thought for her, beyond the kindly orders which Mrs. Hawkesley had given for her comfort, and while the incidents that have been last recorded were passing, she had been left entirely alone. Speedily discovering that there was some unusual excitement in the house, Bertha had hastily dressed, and with half-opened door had sought to discover the meaning of what was going on below. By dint of listening and of spying, and from hearing the joyous cries and conversation of the children, she soon found out something of the state of affairs, and learned that Laura had arrived, and was with her husband. Something Bertha contrived to hear of the interview between Beatrice

and Lygon, and when she had watched the former leaving the drawing-room, Mrs. Urquhart stole down, and took the place at the door where Laura had stood trembling between a last hope and a last despair. Bertha made out that a reconciliation had been effected, and she ground her teeth in impotent anger. All was to be forgotten and forgiven between Arthur and his wife, but what would be Bertha's place in the household circle? Would there be any place at all for her whose sin had brought wretchedness to the English home, death to the home in France? Or was she to be mercifully treated, to be placed away in obscurity, to be provided for by charity, and to be preached into the pretence of repentance? Her state of mind and of health forbad her enduring the idea with ordinary patience, and with a flushed cheek and clenched hands she hurried back to her apartment.

"They are all too good for me," she repeated, as she made some hasty preparations for departure.

Mrs. Hawkesley's bed-room door stood open. Bertha glided into the room, and took a purse that lay upon the toilette table. Then, she came softly down-stairs, stealing from landing to landing, watching lest she should be intercepted. But at that moment a new-found happiness engrossed those who might have stayed her. She reached the hall, again listened, and heard Charles Hawkesley's voice and laugh of excitement. In another minute she had departed, to return to that house no more.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Not that night, but the next day—not in that house, but away in the stillness of a lovely scene of green and shadow, Arthur Lygon and his wife sat for hours, and spoke of the events that had parted them. They had scarcely said, but had strongly felt that such a confidence should precede their return home, and they had almost instinctively chosen a retreat in which, in the earlier days of their wedded life merry hours had been passed, as also happier hours of quiet, of almost silent love. It was in a deep shade, and under the aged beeches where, as was long ago told, Beatrice Hawkesley had planned a joyous day, fated to be postponed until many sorrows should have been borne by her and by those dearest to her, that Laura and Arthur sat, too intensely happy to care much for the pleasant things around them, yet conscious that all was in accord with the music of their own hearts.

Long was the tale she had to tell him, as he lay at her feet—lay where his look was not directly upon her face, yet where the slightest turn of his head brought his eyes upon hers, and where, with a touch of his hand, he could tell her, needlessly now, that he accepted all her words with the faith of a child.

But that Laura began with the beginning, or ended with the end, or told her story as a stranger would have told it to strangers, is more than may be said. Nor might a stranger follow it with the eager affection of him who listened, and who found in a half-uttered word, or in a moment's pause, that which brought his hand to the hand of Laura. But this is something of what she had to tell him under the beeches.

When Laura and her sister, Bertha, were pupils at the school at Lipthwaite, Ernest Adair, or as he was then called, Ernest Hardwick, had recently been engaged as one of the masters. He had resided some time in the town, and had been strongly recommended to Mrs. Spagley, Laura knew not by whom; but the fact was that Marion Wagstaffe, afterwards Mrs. Berry, had procured credentials for the young Anglo-Frenchman from some eminently Protestant friends in London. Acting under her counsels—and why these were so ready, and why so much aid of other kinds was afforded by her, needs not to be told to those who know the rest—Hardwick had gained the good opinion of her Evangelical friends by a device, not then so ordinary as it has since become, and one by which many an admirable and conscientious English woman has been deceived, and has deserved no reproach for her error. It is only those who share the intense conviction, held by thousands, that the creed of Rome is the way to hell, who can fairly appreciate the eager zeal with which such believers

welcome a Catholic apparently open to an effort for his conversion. Even now, when foreign adventurers have worked this mine until one would think its last lode was exhausted, we occasionally find a profligate and plebeian scoundrel, to whom no vice is unknown, succeeding, by dint of lying avowal that he is dissatisfied with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, and desirous of a more "vital" faith, in obtaining access to the homes of England, and in securing a favouritism which would be far more cautiously extended to a Englishman of social position. The police of France and England can tell strange tales of many who have sat, and even yet sit "at good men's feasts." But at the time in question, the game was not so often or so vulgarly played, and it is not to be imputed as a heavy fault to those who, prepared by Miss Wagstaffe's representations, received the handsome, thoughtful, and interesting young doubter, Ernest Hardwick, and, touched by his candour and zeal for truth, not only became the Aquilas and Priscillas to the convert, but aided him to procure such employment as should render him independent of the tyrannical priests whose unwilling slave he described himself doomed to be. He came to Mrs. Spagley's with testimonials which brought tears into the eyes of that well-meaning custodian of so many future wives and mothers.

But he did not come alone. With him came a companion, a Frenchman, younger than himself, who had been his victim in Paris, at a time when

Henri Amyot was dissipating a handsome inheritance in the ordinary courses of a young gentleman's ruin. It was Hardwick who, while plundering his friend, did him the deeper wrong of demoralising him, and of converting a careless, self-indulgent, but not very profligate boy into a premature debauchee, and, finally, into a criminal who had placed himself within reach of the law. When Amyot's means were gone, and he was in a position of danger that rendered him useless to Ernest, the latter thought of discarding Henri, and leaving him to his fate. But they were not to part company so easily, for the pupil had learned something from his master, enough to make Henri a most inconvenient enemy. Later in life, Adair, as he subsequently called himself, might have disposed of this difficulty in some bold fashion of his own. But he was then young, and had not entirely divested himself of the natural affections. They had been friends before they were fellow-criminals, and there was something in the gentle and confiding character of Henri Amyot,—something in the almost childlike trust which he at first reposed in Adair,—which made Ernest reluctant to abandon to utter ruin the lad whom he had so deeply injured. Through all Amyot's vice there was a sentiment, lacking to Adair's, and even when Amyot was revelling in the wildest excesses, he managed to tinge them with a touch of romance, which, if it did not render them less hateful, might have excused some slight pity for the fanciful and impassioned

Henri. Let it have been the tie which is so often formed by the conviction of superiority, or let it have been any temporary sensation of remorse, there was something that forbade Adair to cast away his weak and gentle associate into the abyss, and though he but withdrew Henri from one atmosphere of guilt to introduce him to another, Ernest permitted his friend to cling to him, and the image of that fair young face, with its deep blue eyes and pensive expression, was perhaps the least depraved of the images which garnished the temple of Adair's ungodly worship.

He brought Henri to England with him, and what such friendship as Adair's could do for him was done. Its best effort was but to give Amyot chances similar to those which Adair worked so well. But Amyot was indolent by constitution, and his nature, libertine as he was, recoiled from many a scheme which his master set before him. Henri, though he dared not avow it to the scoffing Adair, had a dream of extricating himself from the slough, and of uniting himself to some exquisitely good and beautiful English girl, of fortune and of piety, who might enable him to pass the rest of his life in an extreme of luxury, but a luxury elevated into poetry, and refined by purity. It was a modest aspiration for the pupil of Ernest Adair, but it was genuine. And when Amyot was established in England, where vicious indulgence was not only not forced upon him, but was scarcely attainable, his purpose strengthened. Poor boy, he took the best course that he knew. He made a vow of virtue, and

he addressed himself to the study of religion—such religion as stealthily read books of Catholic theology taught, and which he adapted and improved to suit his own tastes by an admixture of a poetry which would have scandalised the authors of his manuals. At this time he enjoyed the only happiness of his brief and wasted existence.

For, at this time, when his heart was softened, and even improved by his religious ponderings, and by his withdrawal from the debasing associations of other days, he was introduced, through Adair's means, to Laura Vernon.

The beautiful girl, just emerging into womanhood, and though happy, restless, too, from the sense that her happiness had yet to be complete and defined, was nearly the ideal of Amyot's dream of an English maiden. Her heart, her person, her sweetness of disposition, her gentle yet sensitive nature were all that he could wish, and he believed that his religious efforts had found favour, and that his destiny was to be happy. Ardent and trustful, he at once accepted the representations of Adair that the father of Laura was a man of boundless wealth, which he was hoarding for his children, and poor Henri yielded himself at once to the only pure passion of his prematurely squandered life.

It was the first time in *her* life that Laura Vernon had felt her heart awakened, nor was it strange that the young and graceful Frenchman, with his deep blue eyes, pensive smile, and mingled religion and poesy, should at once fascinate the carelessly educated

girl. We have passed the stage of our story when it could be interesting to dwell on the progress he made in her affections, on the dreamlight with which she—she, at the age of dreams—invested the stranger, and how, with the alchemy of love, she found in her own disadvantages new reasons for loving him. When Henri turned his deep eyes upon her, and in that sweet voice told her of his religious doubts and fears, and exulted in urging upon her that her love had been vouchsafed as his reward, adding—we may be sure he did not forget them—all the more earthly and passionate pleadings of a lover who knows a shorter way to woman's heart—Laura, at seventeen, felt that her time had come, and surrendered her heart, not to Henri Amyot, the worn libertine, but to an ideal of passion and of faith.

In that attitude of cloud-worship were written those letters of which we have heard so much, and many, many more, which Ernest Adair destroyed. He destroyed them, when it came to his turn to read them for a fiendish purpose, and he did so because they were too pure, too holy, to be blended into the foulness which he intermixed. There were but a few of Laura's letters that, by accident, did not on their very faces refute the vileness which Adair and his accomplice sought to fix upon them—of these we have seen the fatal use.

Laura had loved Henri. Nor, as she sat under those beeches, did she seek by word or by tone to deny that it had been so.

The rest is soon told.

Henri Amyot died, and Adair killed him. Not with his hand, nor by violence, and yet at a blow.

With what base intent Adair had made his way to the weak and foolish heart of Laura's sister, what shame followed, and what vile use he made of his power over the girl, to renew the exercise of that power when the girl became a wife, is already known. At first he concealed his treachery from Henri, and encouraged him in the belief that he was on a road of flowers, and on his way to fortune and happiness. It was not until the two young hearts had been knit, until each believed in the happy destiny before it, that Ernest Adair struck his blow. And then it was given almost by chance.

Maddened at the failure of some scheme for raising money, and further stung by the unexpected and firm refusal of Henri Amyot to join him in a plan of fraud, Ernest Adair, as one day the friends were standing on the hill overlooking Lipthwaite, broke out in a torrent of vindictive insult, and met the expostulations of Amyot by a brutal revelation which told all. Mr. Vernon was a beggar, and Laura was the sister of a wanton. He had perhaps added some word—some scoff—against Laura herself, but he looked in the face of Henri Amyot, and he dared not.

He heard one curse—one of those utterances in which agony exhausts itself with a single effort—and then he had to raise the body of Henri Amyot

from that hill-side, and to strive to staunch the blood that welled from the mouth. The earlier life of Henri had done its fatal work, and this one fierce blow was all that was needed. He did not die in Lipthwaite. Adair, in obedience to the only words Henri could speak, the only words he ever spoke again, removed him without farewell to a town at some distance, and in two days more chose his grave.

So broke that dream of Laura's girlhood. Heaven is kinder to our young children than to permit such grief to be durable, and with womanhood came the graver sense of the meaning of life. But that girl-love and its rapid ending made their mark on the character of Laura, and the portrait that hangs on Lygon's wall, and that speaks of troubles and of suffering, tells, though the painter knew it not—the husband knows it now—something that it had not told but for Henri Amyot. And that rosary of golden beads—you know now whence they came, and Arthur Lygon knows it too.

"And I *will* ask, darling, and yet I know the answer—why this was all kept from me. No, you shall not say. I did not deserve to be told."

"My own Arthur—I *dared not.*"

"Dared not?"

"I thought I knew your nature, Arthur, and I loved you too well to risk the happiness of being your wife. I had heard you speak of first loves, and you had declared that no woman loved twice. This was before we married, and I kept a secret

which I never dared to tell afterwards. Oh, when you have praised my courage, and I knew that I was a wicked coward—"

"You shall not say it."

"But you know me now—you know me your own, heart and soul. Is it not so, my own?"

"My wife!"

"Yes. That is all I ask to hear. God bless you!"

"Does He not?"

And will they live happy ever afterwards? That is not for me to say, for, save one dark chapter, I have finished the story of the breaking and re-uniting of the Silver Cord.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Two days passed, and Ernest Adair received no summons from the person to whom he had been directed to announce his arrival in England. This time he passed at the lodging he had taken, seldom venturing out, except to procure himself some of the minor luxuries to which one who has long resided on the Continent is accustomed, and which do not enter into the coarse calculations of a lodging-house keeper. A little fruit on his breakfast-table, a box of sardines, even a few flowers, were among the humble requirements of Adair, and his two-pennyworth of roses was arranged with as careful an attention to their grouping, as if the hand that set them out had been that of an innocent girl who varied her task with a song. Adair, too, varied his task with songs, but they were not such as a girl should sing, or hear. Their meaning, however, was, of course, lost upon the rest of the household, and the foreign gentleman was supposed to be rehearsing for his theatrical duties. He gave little trouble, smoked incessantly, and occupied himself with newspapers, which he bought in large numbers, and searched for paragraphs of foreign news, the nature of which, happily for the peace of those with whom

he sojourned, came not within their homely imaginations. But he searched in vain.

A third day passed, and the monotony of Ernest's existence suddenly began to press upon him with a dead weight. Those who have lived a life of business, or of irritating excitement, have their moments of repose, when a species of almost defiant pleasure is found in the interval of stagnant inaction. But such persons, under such circumstances, not unfrequently arouse to a feverish and despairing sensation, when the stillness of this life becomes intolerable, and even at the risk of destroying arranged schemes, or of running upon foreseen perils, they must do something to satisfy or subdue the energies which revolt against repression. Prudence warns in vain, the blood flows hotly, and the brain works feverishly, and the swimmer who has drifted into one of the still pools of the stream of life, cannot bear to lie floating, but must strike out again into the torrent, though he well knows that his expected boat is yet far away, and that the current must whirl him along to perdition. Fortunate is the man on whom Nature at such an hour lays her restraining hand, throwing him upon a bed of sickness, but this is a good fortune which, though it occurs with felicitous precision to the heroes of fiction, seldom arrives so opportunely in actual life. It came not to Ernest Adair, who, in full health and vigour, found himself suddenly doomed to tormenting inactivity, among those who were incapable of supplying him with society, and at whom he scoffed,

perhaps instinctively rather than with malice, when exchanging with them the common-place civilities of their home, and of his hiding-place.

A fourth day passed, and Adair's loneliness, far more depressing than actual solitude would have been, became unbearable. On the night that Haureau had accosted him, Ernest had spent a couple of hours with a strange and coarse gang to whom the former had introduced him, and though Adair's dislike for such associates had made his conversation that evening one long sneer, except when in a sort of humorous despair, he had sought the applause of his companions by some wild outbreak of ribaldry, or worse, avenged on himself the next instant by a bitter self-loathing, even such society was better than none at all, or than the enduring the harmless platitudes of his new neighbours. He determined once more to visit the river-side haunt to which Haureau had taken him.

It was nearly dark when he summoned his landlady, informed her that business of importance took him into the city, and charged her to take the utmost care of any letter that might arrive.

"It's late hours for the city, sir, isn't it?" said the woman. "I thought that city gentlemen shut up early."

"Theatrical gentlemen do not, you know, Mrs. Wallis, and we must call on business men in the hours of business, talk business, and go about our business, that they may have time to attend to

their business, as I see you have stuck up in your parlour."

"Well, to think that you should notice that, sir. and have a memory for it, too," replied Mrs. Wallis. "I do believe a memory is the gift of God."

"Do you?" said Adair. "Some people believe in an exactly opposite direction, but never mind that."

"No, sir, and I'm sure I beg your pardon for taking the liberty of naming it. But would you mind taking the latch-key?"

"Not a bit, if you don't mind trusting me with it?"

"Oh, sir, anybody could see that you are a gentleman to be trusted, though to speak the truth, we used to be set against moustaches, having been sufferers by the same, but everybody wears them now, and if persons were not intended to wear them, I suppose they wouldn't have been given. I tell my husband so, when he makes a piece of work if he can't find the halfpence to go round and be shaved, for shaving himself is what he never could and never did do, but he laughs, and says that the hair comes to help the barber to live, and so it does, if one looks at it in that way."

"Well, I am glad you look at mine in a favourable way, Mrs. Wallis, and I hope Mr. Wallis will not be jealous."

The good-natured woman laughed very heartily, had no doubt but that there was a younger and a prettier lady to think about Mr. Hyde's moustaches,

gave him the latch-key, and promised that a candle should be left burning for him in the passage.

The candle burned out, but it outlasted the life of him for whom it was lighted.

Ernest Adair left the house, and, turning into one of the large thoroughfares, mounted upon an omnibus that was making its slow night progress towards the city. The vehicle was nearly empty, and proceeded at a funereal pace which once or twice elicited an imprecation from the only outside passenger. Yet, had he known it, his progress was fast enough for him. If there are intelligences, commissioned or volunteering to watch over the separate destiny of a mortal, and who have marked all his wanderings and circuitous journeyings in the world, and seen him press eagerly forward when he should have tarried, and sit down, wearied, when a few vigorous steps would have given him the object of his blind quest, we may imagine them moved, either in pity or in mockery, when, for the last time, he exerts his boasted free-will, and addresses himself to the moral or the physical effort which is to carry him over one edge of the waiting grave. Is there a flutter of phantom wings, and a gaze of increased interest, as the spirits note the beginning of the end, or is the thought but one of the dreams which are to be scared from each and all of us when the hour of waking comes?

Late into the night was prolonged the orgy in the haunt by the river. The room was long and low, and heavy beams upheld the house above it. The

old-fashioned windows, strongly made and fitted with small panes, told that several generations had drunk under the beams, and had, each in its turn, been pityingly spoken of by enlightened successors, the newest series of whom was then pitying its fathers, and hastening to be pitied by its children. But there was no special feature that distinguished the dingy room from many another in the neighbourhood. Its dented tables and sawdusted floor were like those of a score of hostelries within reach, nor was it a special haunt of evil-doers. Very good and jolly fellows, mostly connected in some way with shipping, or with the commerce that creates it, had passed many jovial and blameless hours there, kind and honest greetings had been exchanged in homely language over the liquors of the place, many a good voyage on the sea had been honestly wished, and many a loved and loving woman, wife or sweetheart, had been toasted there with words that might have brought a tear to her eye, but not a blush to her cheek. And many a group of scoundrels had also met in that room, where the worst of them had spoken in low voices which no excitement of drink could elevate into manly freedom, and others, perhaps not the worst, had given vile toasts and shouted vile songs, and all had reeled away, making uncertain progress through the street, but certain and measured advance towards the Devil.

Perhaps no worse group had ever occupied the room than those gathered round a table in a corner-box on the night of Adair's second visit. There

were five or six men, foreigners, but whose nationality it would have been hard to define. Their costumes were not squalid, but incongruous, and it seemed as if each had bought some one new and good garment, when he happened to have the means, without reference to the rest of his dress. The handsome coat of one man half covered a wretchedly threadbare vest, while the showy waistcoat of a second shamed the poverty of his other clothes, and the nether man presented similar contrasts. Some of them wore jewellery, which looked good, and as if it had been procured as a safe and portable investment against a time of need, but one or two had no such adornments on their persons. The faces of the party seemed at first to bear a strong family likeness, and it was not until one had observed closely a group that ill repaid such study, that the general impression of sallowness, dishonesty, and ferocity subsided into more distinct ideas, and enabled a spectator to note that at least half the men were mere tools, and that Haureau, and a couple of evil looking persons who sat close to him, were the masters of that company.

They were drinking and smoking when Adair came in, and there was the combined gabble which characterises such meetings among foreigners, and which contrasts with the silence maintained by Englishmen of the same kind, while some one dull guest is permitted to drone and prose over something which the party accepts as a narrative. But it was curious to notice that at the approach of a

stranger, who could ill be made out in the smoke and gloom, not only did those who could see him instantly suspend talking, but the signal of silence was caught by those whose backs were towards the new-comer. It was like the hindmost pointer's drop into attitude at sight of the point of his colleague in the field.

Haureau rose, and came round to Ernest Adair.

"So, my friend, you have lost no time in coming to be congratulated?"

"Congratulated on what, in the devil's name?" was the ungracious response.

"Why, you have had your letter?"

"I have had none."

"Nothing from that lawyer?"

"Nothing."

"And no message?"

"None."

"Then you have no business here. That you know well, Adair."

"Business or none, I *am* here, and, being here, I mean to stop. I will not kill myself by inches."

"Nobody asked you to kill yourself at all," said Haureau, looking at him with a sinister expression. "But you were ordered to remain on guard until relieved."

"And I have deserted my post," replied Adair. savagely. "What is this letter you talk of?"

"You have heard nothing?"

"Nothing, once more. Do you want me to swear it?"

"Well, no, I cannot say that I do; great weight as your oath would, of course, have. But, come here."

He seized the arm of Ernest and led him, not to a seat, but between two of the party, and all the upturned eyes of that group were at once upon Adair.

"Our friend informs me that he has received no orders or instructions of any kind, and yet he is here. He is a brave man, is he not?"

A strange, growling assent passed round.

"A brave man," repeated Haureau. "A chair for the brave man. We will drink his health, English fashion."

Ernest Adair took a seat, and lit a cigar, but did not speak.

"He is impatient for some news, which I will tell him by-and-by," said Haureau, with a coarse laugh. "Meantime, fill, all of you, and drink to him."

The men obeyed, some with a slight and sullen nod, others with a more elaborate and mocking gesture.

Ernest's answer was a mocking curse, addressed to the group generally. At this Haureau laughed boisterously, and pushed a glass towards Adair.

But, three hours later, when the room had long been abandoned by all save Haureau's party, Ernest Adair was in another mood. He had drunk deeply, he had poured out a flood of wild and ribald talk,

such as no pen sets down even for men like himself, he had sang songs, and he had in turn encountered each of his companions in a combat of abuse, in which he had utterly vanquished and silenced all except Haureau, against whose imperturbable but ruffianly jollity Adair's sarcasms were spent in vain, while his denunciations were met by nods of approbation, given with a meaning which Ernest was not too intoxicated to observe were intended, and which he pointed out scoffingly to the others, and defied Haureau to explain.

Soon afterwards, Ernest, who had been steadily gazing at Haureau, and in an under voice delivering himself of new taunts, looked round, and saw that the party had diminished by one-half.

"So," he exclaimed, "I have whipped them to their kennels, have I?"

"Nay, nay," said Haureau, "they are good men, and have gone home to their wives."

Ernest Adair looked at him for a moment, and then sang—

> "Woman keeps us waiting now,
> But she shall wait for us to-morrow."

"*Shall she?*" said Haureau, smiling.

"Yes, she shall," responded Adair, with drunken fierceness.

"You must go home, Ernest Adair," said Haureau.

"How dare you dictate to me what I shall do, galley-slave?"

There was an angry murmur at the word, and

Ernest Adair, more incensed, repeated it, and looking savagely round, declared all present except himself to be convicts escaped from the galleys.

"Brave talk," said Haureau, repressing his companions, who rose in wrath, and whom he compelled to seat themselves. "Brave talk. But, my friend, you dare no more stay away to-night from your lodgings than you dare throw yourself into the river that keeps lapping and plashing there."

"I dare not? I will not return to my lodgings, galley-slave, and if I do not throw myself into the river, it is because I am dressed like a gentleman, and do not choose to spoil my clothes, for fear I should look like you and your gaol-birds here."

"You dare not remain out. Else I would row you over to *my* lodgings, and we would make a night of it. But go home and obey orders."

"Row me to your lodgings. Do you live on the river Styx, or the river Acheron?"

"No matter—you dare not come."

"Dare not, and with rowers like you and your friends, who learned to row in the galleys—classical ruffians as you are. Styx or Acheron, I ask you?"

They all went out soon afterwards, Haureau walking beside Ernest Adair, who had now worked himself into the phase of intoxication in which one is perfectly, subtly, conscious of all that goes on or is said around, but supposes oneself to be reserving all comment for another occasion. He walked uprightly, repulsing the arm of Haureau, and the party, turning down a narrow lane, proceeded along

a small wharf, and stopped at a tall gate, partially latticed.

"Are these your lodgings, Haureau?" said Adair. "That is very like a prison window—you must feel quite at home."

He spoke distinctly, yet without the intonation that used to give point to his speeches of other days.

"No, this is my carriage house," said Haureau, opening the door.

Looking in, Adair perceived water. The place was an old boat-house, but there was no boat there. The tide was high, and the gloomy space within resembled a tank, only that under the eaves there came a gleam from a distant lamp.

Adair was sobered into self-possession in a moment. The next, his hand was upon his breast. But Haureau's iron clutch was upon the wrist of Ernest, who at the same instant felt his other arm seized by two of his companions.

Even at that instant, and with the conviction that came upon him, the courage of Ernest Adair did not forsake him.

"Listen, Haureau!" he said.

"We have listened to you enough to-night, my friend. It is your turn to be silent for a long time."

"I understand."

"All that was wanted has been learned without your help, and you are dismissed."

"Bertha!" cried Ernest, with a bitter cry.

It was a dastard blow, but which of the ruffians around him struck it will never be known till the Judgment. Then the senseless body was thrust through the door, and into the dark water.

It must have lingered in that shed, and have been fetched away by another tide. For it was on the following night, and very late into that night, that some men who were on their way to a barge upon the river came upon the body as it lay at the foot of a little causeway. Scarcely paler than in life, and with the peace of death on the brow beneath which throbbed no longer that once busy brain—parted in death the lips whose words had been sin, and whose kiss had been shame—so lay Ernest Adair. The secret of his death has been well kept, and he lies in a nameless grave.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

We were to have had but one chapter more, and, indeed, there is little else to tell; and yet one would not willingly bring down our curtain upon a mournful *tableau*. Of some thirty persons who have more or less actively aided in our story, two have died by violence, and the hand of death was upon the third, when her connection with the narrative ceased. She is gone, and Mr. Berry has disposed of his Lipthwaite property to Sir Frederic Charrington, and upon the site of Cromwell Lodge a school for girls now flourishes, under the patronage, and, what is better, under the vigilance of Lady Charrington. It is a school where the girls are taught more cookery than catechism.

In strictness, Bertha Urquhart ought to have made a sorrowful end, upon which (to preserve the theatrical image) the rose-coloured light of a sentimental repentance should have been thrown. But, weak in all else, she was too weak to offer an example of poetical justice. The property left by Robert Urquhart was realised, and it afforded her a comfortable income, upon which she lived for some months at Cheltenham, where she married a gentleman who had been an officer in Her Majesty's service. He had been an exceedingly fast man,

but having spent all his money, and a good deal more, had to sell out, and look out. He looked out well, and wooed as fast as he had lived. He is kind to Bertha, and she understands him—the severest thing one can say of him, for he is a very good-natured Gorilla. Bertha has taken to distributing tracts, and in a season or two, unless she runs away again, will possibly have a private evening service for herself and select friends, at the St. James's Hall.

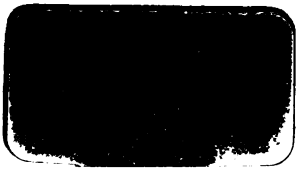
Alphonse Silvain has, of course, married Mary Henderson, and will exhibit perfumery at the International Exhibition next year. Meantime his wife exhibits, with intense pride, an international baby, which has been christened Laura.

Archibald Vernon continues to live at Canonbury, and to retain the conviction that he is an ill-used man, whom the world has never comprehended. It is reported that he also has thought of coming before that world, next year, and has gone to the extent of promising to write to Charles Hawkesley, to get him to ascertain whether any kind of lecture-room is likely to be vacant in the middle of the approaching summer.

Charles Hawkesley's new play has been a tremendous success for Mr. Aventayle, and, strangely enough, for the author himself. For the admirable but eccentric manager got hold of an idea that an author and a manager might be regarded as partners in the production of a piece, much as author and bookseller stand in the production of a volume.

And "after expenses," and other deductions of a very just and righteous character, Aventayle actually shared with Hawkesley the profits of *Reckoning without the Host.* The proceeding is most ridiculous, but Aventayle says that he is satisfied, and that the author is devoting himself to the composition of another play, of the very best character, and to which he can afford to give ample time and elaborate workmanship. This is an age of experiments and new-fangled notions, but this headlong advance towards the recognition of the value of brain-work is surely to be deprecated. A present of a fifty-pound note, on a three hundredth night, with speeches and reporters, would have been an act of generosity as well as a capital advertisement, and quite enough. But Aventayle is an odd man, and if he were not growing so rich, one might speak of his eccentricities with more severity.

So ends our story of man's wickedness and woman's weakness, of false love that brought ruin, of true love that lived through the storm.

THE END.

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